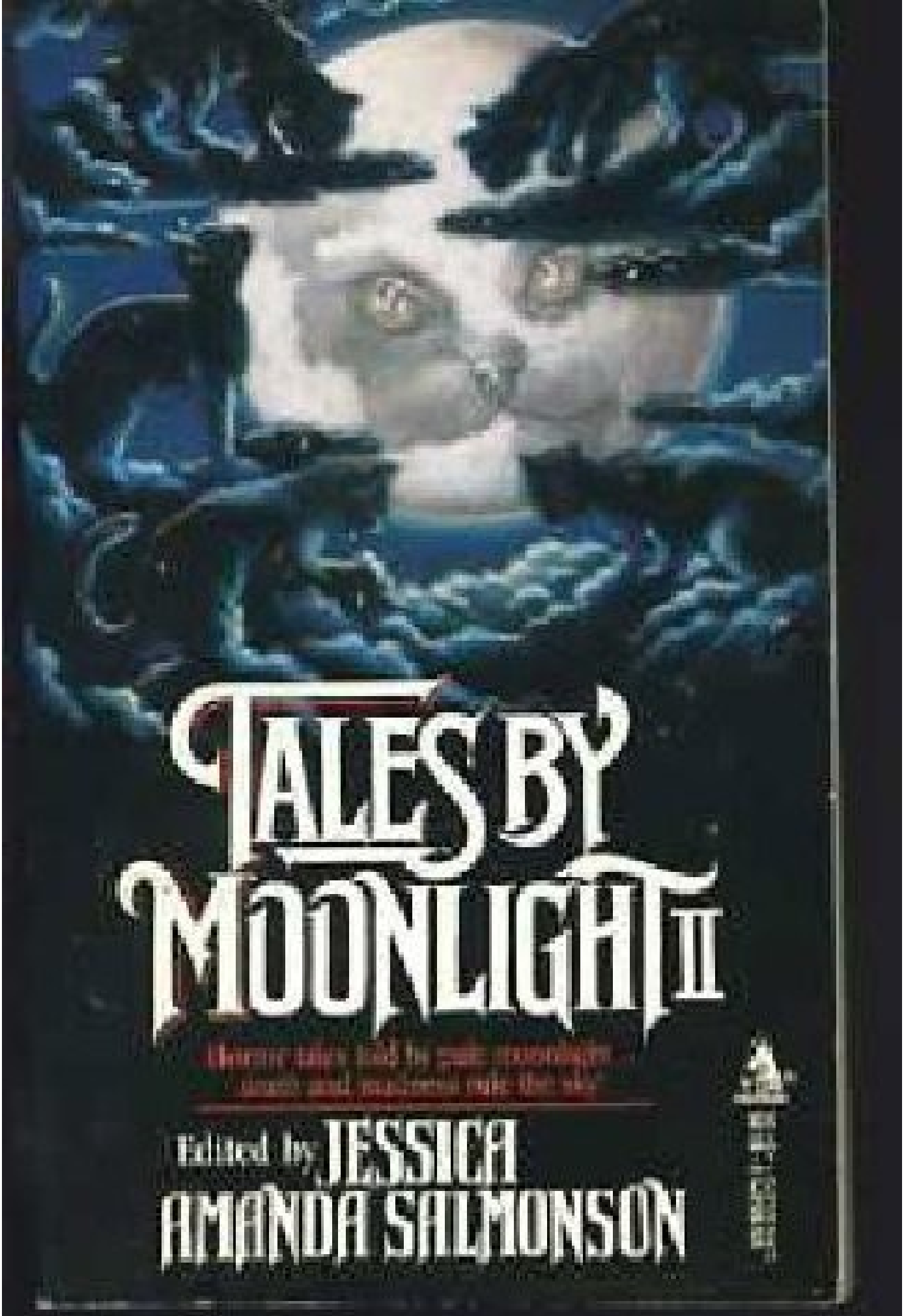

TALES BY MOONLIGHT II

Edited by JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON

To Kim

“psycho ninja ballerina”

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Appendix I: How to Publish Your Own Shoestring Horror Magazine

A Glimpse of Supernatural Literature and the Small Presses

Jessica Amanda Salmonson

> We searchers after horror haunt strange far places
> Catacombs of Ptolemais; cobwebbed staircases;
> Carven mausolea and moonlit towers;
> Half-silent hideaways of unclean powers;
> Dark woods of ghastly scenes, desolate mountain
> shrines;
>
> Sinister monoliths where sunlight never shines;
> Stark, repugnant islands; weird, piping fantasia;
> Nightmare countries; lost cities in Asia;
> Lonely farmhouses of a backwoods county...
> Thus begins the chant of a horror fan's bounty.
>
> -- paraphrase of Lovecraft

From antiquity to medieval times, a book had to be handwritten page by page by page -- often beautifully illuminated. Convents and monasteries were veritable small publishers, issuing religious fables, and accounts of the magical doings of angels and saints, and other subjects that are the source of much modern fantasy. The classic of the type is Gesta Romanorum or Tales of the Monks, an influence on everybody from Chaucer to Flaubert to such Pre-Raphaelites as William Morris and even many of today's better-grounded fantasists.

It is only quite recently that big business has taken over the idea of publishing -- and they've bollixed it so amazingly that they've, ultimately, created greater opportunities for small presses to fill specific voids. A complete history of the small press would require many lengthy

monographs. A history of small press fantastic literature per se could be the focus of a doctoral thesis.

Small presses have provided the reader of eccentric tastes with a reliable diet of macabre stories for at least two centuries. In the days of Defoe -- himself an inveterate pamphleteer -- chapmen slapped together booklets to hawk in the streets. Their chapbooks, often enough, were about ghosts, witchcraft, and sundry perverse and delightful topics. In the wake of "Monk" Lewis' popularity, the chapmen peddled every conceivable variation of Lewis' horror classic in digest form, as well as original tales inspired by The Monk and lesser gothics.

It could well be argued that the modern horror short story began with these wee chapbooks, for elsewhere the newly innovated Gothic went on and on for two, three, maybe four large volumes. The chapmen required tales with the same popular topics but told in a very few thousand words so that the resultant paper-clad book could be hauled about in large numbers.

Throughout Victoria's reign, it remained common for bookshop owners to publish books. Many a ghost story collection came into being as a result, including those of Mrs. Riddell. When Dickens popularized the idea of Christmas Annuals, bookstores published their own, with the weird tale a fundamental type of content.

Amateur Press Associations (apas) were another Victorian phenomenon, which, in little-altered form, continue to this day, involving primarily fans of fantasy, horror, and science fiction. These apas have always consisted generally of "communal" letters and mini-magazines circulated to a small, interactive membership. Today, for the horror fanatic, there is the Esoteric Order of Dagon for a specific example of a modern apa. Lovecraft was himself active early in this century in the type of apa that had its origins in Victorian times. Hence, through Lovecraft, who also involved himself in the first genuine "fanzines" of fantastic literature, we may see a direct link from The Monk-plagiarizing chapmen to the bookshop publishers to the Victorian amateur presses to the modern small-press horror magazines.

For all the influence of the small press on fantastic literature, no anthology has before now been drawn exclusively from this rich, alternative source of

stories. There have been many anthologies among "mainstream" publishers drawn from non-fantasy small presses, notably the Pushcart Prize annuals. Yet nothing similar has been done for the fantastic, although Karl Edward Wagner's Year's Best Horror draws heavily on the small horror magazines, and numerous stories of note, reprinted in collections of leading writers' work, had their original appearance in small magazines. Thus the average reader of horror has had some inkling of the existence of these little magazines, acquired by perusing the acknowledgments page of various anthologies or collections. But how to find these magazines? There's the rub.

Most of them have a marginal circulation and so are quite rare. There is no reliable resource in libraries for tracking them down -- at least, not until they're ancient history. As a rule, only the contributions of the most famous authors are soon reprinted for wider consumption, meaning much of the best material, by writers without commercial names, remains little known to all save a small circle of fanatical collectors of strange tales -- a circle that includes many top authors, artists, and editors, so that there is a real sense of community and a viable connection to the larger arena of professional writing and publishing. Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, and Robert Silverberg published their own magazines and became well known to professionals before they were themselves popular authors. More recently, Charles de Lint, Charles R. Saunders, and Gordon Linzner launched professional careers from a base of early recognition in the small presses.

This is an ongoing process. Many of today's authors, known only to readers of the little magazines, will be widely known a few years from now. And it would be wrong to think of this as journeyman labor, not yet sufficiently polished. Dennis Etchison debuted much of his best-known work in Whispers and Karl Edward Wagner's well-known Kane stories appeared in Midnight Sun before gaining the attention of major publishers. And the authors rarely vanish from the small presses altogether -- unless they fall so deeply into the commercial angle that they write novels exclusively -- as there is much pleasure in the small presses even aside from the fact that there aren't enough big, paying markets for short story writers. So it is always the case that alongside new writers there are famous ones, with an exciting if uneven product assured the readers.

This modern phenomenon of small horror magazines began in the 1930s. A pioneer of this unselfconscious "movement" was William Crawford, whose Marvel Tales (1934-35) went five issues, featuring August Derleth, David H. Keller, Clifford D. Simak, and P. Schuyler Miller. Crawford also published three issues of Unusual Stories (1934-35) and continued to be active throughout his life, publishing Witchcraft & Sorcery with Gerald W. Page as editor in the 1970s. This latter magazine featured E. Hoffmann Price, E. C. Tubb, Gahan Wilson, L. Sprague de Camp, Brian Lumley, Emil Petaja, and Miriam Alien deFord.

The young Donald Wollheim, much later to found DAW Books, produced one issue of Fanciful Tales (1936) with new works by Keller, Derleth, and H. P. Lovecraft. William H. Barlow's Leaves (1937-39) included new works by Clark Ashton Smith, C. L. Moore, Donald Wandrei, Frank Belknap Long, Fritz Leiber, Robert E. Howard, and H. P. Lovecraft. Other titles of the decade were The Acolyte, Bizarre, and Unique Tales. Charles Hornig's The Fantasy Fan with eighteen issues in three years drew the participation of Lovecraft, Smith, Bloch, Derleth, Keller, Howard, and many similar authors. Julius Schwartz, later a leading light at DC Comics, published Fantasy Magazine at mid-decade, notable for a round-robin story by C. L. Moore, A. Merritt, Lovecraft, Howard, and Long. A very young Bradbury published his own Futuria Fantasia in the late thirties, including his own earliest stories.

This type of publishing continued through the forties and fifties at a somewhat reduced clip. Joe Kennedy's Vampire featured Sam Moskowitz and Gerry de la Ree; in the seventies, de la Ree issued artfolios of Steve Fabian and Virgil Finlay. Manly Banister's Nekromantikon, in its five-issue life, featured early work by Lin Carter and Marion Zimmer Bradley. August Derleth's Arkham Sampler had eight issues in 1948 and 1949, revived for ten more issues as The Arkham Collector 1967-71. Joseph Payne Brennan's long-running Macabre began in the fifties, its last issue in 1976. Two issues of The Vortex appeared in the forties, edited by Gordon Kull and George Cowie. That same decade saw W. Paul Cook's The Ghost, notable for serious studies of macabre fiction (five issues, 1943-1947). As the pulp era

came to a close in the late fifties, and Weird Tales itself vanished from the scene, small press alternatives again picked up steam.

The 1960s gave us Samuel D. Russell's scholarly Haunted, with articles by Leiber, Bloch, and Bradbury; poems by Roger Zelazny and Donald Sydney Fryer; and short stories by such as Janet Fox. Paul J. Willis published a first-rate journal called Anubis that ran material by the underground comix genius Vaughn Bode and prose by Zelazny and Gerald W. Page.

W. Paul Ganley's Weirdbook, which continues powerfully to this day, began in 1968, the premier issue alone impressively offering a previously unpublished story by Robert E. Howard and new tales by Weird Tales regulars H. Warner Munn and Joseph Payne Brennan. It is today the leading small press magazine appearing regularly. Gordon Linzner founded Space & Time in 1969 and it, too, is still going strong and is much imitated by other small publishers.

The 1970s saw a proliferation of small horror magazines. The first run of Fantasy & Terror, edited by myself with help from fantasist Phyllis Ann Karr, went from 1973 to 1975, revived in the eighties with Richard H. Fawcett as its publisher. Dr. Schiff's Whispers appeared regularly in those days and still exists on less than an annual basis, alongside his Doubleday hardcover anthology series of the same name. Etchings & Odysseys was founded by Eric Carlson and John Koblas in 1973 and became, in the eighties, under the direction of R. Alain Everts of The Strange Company, one of the most visually stunning magazines of its kind. David Sutton and Stephen Jones' Fantasy Tales, Michael Ambrose's The Argonaut, and Crispin Burnham's Eldritch Tales are three excellent journals launched in the seventies and still in operation. Harry O. Moms' Nyctalops is another visual treat that continues to this day, along with many other fine publications from his and Christin Morris' Silver Scarab Press.

Some lamented titles of the decade include Fred C. Adams' Spoor; Chris Marler and Mark Jacobs' Astral Dimensions; C. C. Clingan's Diversifier; David Warren's Evermist; Edward Paul Berglund's Beyond the Dark Gateway, where T. E. D. Kline's novel Ceremonies had its beginning; Meade Frierson's HPL Tribute, its supplements, and a companion journal Unnamable; Lawson Hill's Myrddin, one issue of which featured a laid-in

floppy record of speeches by Robert Bloch and Frank Belknap Long; Gerald Brown's Night Voyages; Wayne Warfield's Fantasy Digest; John Martin's stunning Anduril in England; Leo Wagner and Al D. Cockrell's many-incarnationed Wyrd; W. Paul Ganley's Eerie Country, which served for a time as companion to Weirdbook; Hans-Peter Warner's Prelude to Fantasy; and Unique, the last of many magazines issued over more than twenty years by Ken Krueger. Jonathon Bacon's Fantasy Crossroads and Fantasy Crosswinds with sixteen issues collectively (1974-79) had a who's who roster of contributors. Gary Hoppenstand's Midnight Sun through the same years featured Basil Cooper, Charles Grant, Brennan, Ellison, and Robert Weinberg. Damon C. Sasser's The Chronicler of Cross Plains and Two-Gun Raconteur focused on Robert E. Howard, as did many publications of the time, including 'George Scithers's Amra. Dark Fantasy was Canada's leading journal up to the untimely death of its young editor Gene Day. Jon M. Harvey's Spectre Press in England issued Balthus, Cthulhu, and Dreams of a Dark Hue, still occasionally resurfacing with something interesting, such as the collected poetry of Brian Lumley.

The seventies also marked the editing debut of Rosemary Pardoe, founding editor in 1971 of the British Fantasy Society's Dark Horizon. Since 1979 she has run The Haunted Library, which issues the influential magazine Ghosts & Scholars together with many fine chapbooks of Jamesian ghost stories.

If the seventies sound like busy years, they were only a warm-up for the present decade. The number of magazines is now so great that my concerted effort to locate the half of them was doomed to failure. Some fade away after one or two issues, quickly replaced by others, so that there seems to be fifty titles existing at any given moment. A handful of current ones (for which I've seen, in most cases, at least three issues) may be considered reliable bets for the near future:

Doppelganger is published by Richard H. Fawcett and edited by John Benson, himself editor-publisher of Not One of Us; John goes for newer writers. Greg Boyd's Asylum has a literate, arty approach. David Silva's The Horror Show is a throwback to the pulp era. Jeffrey Dempsey and David Cowperthwaite in England produce Dark Dreams and associated

chapbooks. Richard H. Fawcett, whose mini-empire includes the newsletter of the August Derleth Society, publishes fantasy Macabre, founded by David Reeder and edited by myself since the fifth issue. Lari Davidson's Potboiler in Canada goes for very wicked tales. Fantasy Book, a title first used by William Crawford in the forties, reappeared in the eighties under the guidance of Dennis Mallonee and Nick Smith, leaning toward heroic and modern fantasy. Joseph K. Cherke's Haunts focuses on little-known writers of decided ability. Others include Randall D. Larson's very occasional Threshold of Fantasy; the British Fantasy Society's Winter Chills; Bill Munster's Footsteps and associated chapbooks; Gary W. Crawford's revived scholarly journal Gothic; R. Alain Everts's new series Arkham Sampler and his extremely active line of chapbooks; Robert M. Price's Crypt of Cthulhu, which would be, by now, in about its fiftieth issue, the cornerstone of a surprisingly active group of publications including William H. Pugmire's Tales of Lovecraftian Horror and Shawn Ramsey's Revelations from Yuggoth; plus so many others that I despair of leaving them off the list.

Something I'm especially delighted to see is more and more women involving themselves as horror editors and publishers as well as writers. Lora Crozetti published Venus in the 1940s with original stories by the likes of Leigh Brackett. Pat Cadigan's Shayol of the seventies and early eighties stands unequalled in physical beauty. Rosemary Pardoe and I have been active in the last two decades. Today we're not exceptions. Peggy Nadramia of Grue, Gretta M. Anderson of 2AM, Deb Rasmussen of Portents, and Christine Hoard of that daring nasty-nasty Twisted are a few of the women producing fine little-magazines of horror.

The authors associated with these journals include every famous name you'd want to line up in a row, alongside newcomers of equal talent (or not, as the case may be).

This overview might have included publishers of non-serial items such as Roy Squires, famed for fine-press reissues of Weird Tales authors, or John Pelan's Axolotl Press, producing handsomely bound volumes of novelette-length stories such as Michael Shea's hideously wrought Fat Face. There are

also a sizable number of specialty houses that do hardcovers almost exclusively: Underwood-Miller, Donald M. Grant, Fantasia, Dark Harvest, Mark Zeising, Scream/Press, Owlswick, Pulphouse, Celt Press, and Arkham House are a sampling of the houses I mean. Their production values exceed those of New York houses. They're successful at reaching the libraries and hardcover collectors' market, so I've chosen not to reprint from their excellent volumes, as they're already easily accessible. They have influenced the orientation of the magazine editors in that Weirdbook, Whispers,'and Space & Time have added hardcover and trade paperback lines to their yearly production schedules.

Though predominantly a British and North American phenomenon, there are occasional magazines of other nations. The final, double issue of Barry Radburn's The Australian Horror & Fantasy Magazine was a special women's issue. Xavier Legrand-Ferroniere publishes Le Visage Vert in France. Francesco Cova published Kadath in Italy in English language. Franz Rottensteiner publishes a journal in Austria and Eddy C. Berlin in Belgium.

Another footnote is the science fiction small magazine. There is presently New Pathways published by Michael G. Adkisson and, in England, the collective-edited Interzone. Both aspire to an eighties version of sixties New Wave. Very sadly to be lamented is Scott Edelman's short-lived Last Wave, a genuinely literary magazine of fantasy/sci-fi. There have been similar attempts at alternatives to dreadfully commercialized science fiction publishing. But for many reasons, the small presses began with and retain an orientation toward fantasy and horror. There has never been an equally vital movement of science fiction small publishers.

* * *

Of definite influence on the present selection has been the supernatural output of non-specialized publishers such as Fiction International, The Fiction Collective, Ecco Press, Sono Nis, Black Swan, Black Sparrow,

Cadmus, and on and on. I wished I were doing two anthologies drawing from small presses -- one for the little horror magazines, the other from single-author collections issued in trade paperback by the so-called mainstream small presses. It was heartbreaking to pass over so much' superior fiction little known to genre paperback buyers. I've tried to refer to as many fantastic titles as room allowed in the headnotes to stories reprinted from such sources, but even a superficial list of the last ten years would require pages of bibliography. I hope I've provided enough information throughout this volume so it will become an easier task to track down not only the current horror magazines, but also individual titles from literary presses.

I hesitate to select a mere handful of examples. But with full knowledge that I'll weep to see what I neglected to include, I'll rattle off a scant few collections currently in print, unreservedly recommended: Renee Vivien's Woman of the Wolf (Gay Press), Machado de Assis' The Devil's Church (University of Texas), Dino Buzatti's Restless Nights and Apollinaire's The Poet Assassinated and Other Stories (Northpoint), Barbara Burford's The Threshing Floor (Firebrand), Michael Bullock's The Story of Noire (Third Eye), Goethe's Tales for Transformation (City Lights), Anne Cameron's Daughter of Copper Woman (Press Gang), Jovette Marchessault's Lesbian Triptych (Women's Press in Canada), and Jean Muno's Glove of Passion, Voice of Blood (Owlcreek). These and others like them are generally packaged to fool nonfantasy readers into buying them, managing instead to hide themselves from discerning readers of the fantastic and the macabre.

All these small press sources taken together reveal an inescapable impact on supernatural literature equal to, or greater than, the impact of the mass market, at least where the art of the short story is concerned. Most major-house horror anthologies can be expected to deliver competence and reliability but very little of genius: a median level of what commerce finds acceptable. But in alternative sources, amidst much that is laughable, cute, or bad, there is also, to be certain, much the finest supernatural fiction being produced in our century. As, I trust, Tales by Moonlight II adequately conveys.

Proem: The Haunted Street

Marion Zimmer Bradley

Just once I walked that narrow, cluttered street,
penned by damp houses, overhanging low
with shuttered gables and old panes to throw
the blood-red sunset at my hesitant feet.
The houses all were empty, and the slow
pace of my steps resounded, and each blow
echoed my heart, which almost ceased to beat.

The vacant windows leered with empty glee
near cobweb-traced black doors that nearly fell
from screaming hinges; and the clogged old well
that poisonous, leaf-choked, stared back up at me
(as if there was some horror it would tell)
showed me a black and open shaft to Hell!

-- The Nekromantikon #2, 1950

Dream of a Mannikin, or the Third Person

Thomas Ligotti

> *When Tom Ligotti's stories began to appear in small magazines such as England's* Fantasy Tales *and the artier American journals* Nyctalops *and* Grimoire, *a lot of collectors began murmuring "dark genius" and "must be a real paranoid." His work is finally beginning to find professional acceptance thanks in part to Ramsey Campbell and myself, his first major anthologists who brought him to Tor and Ace. For too long only small press editors were open to his work, which is, perhaps, too good and too personal to have had instant recognition from complacent, well-established editors. His stories can be found in* Grue, Crypt of Cthulhu, Fantasy Macabre; *and* Fantasy & Terror. *"Dream of a Mannikin, or the Third Person" appeared originally in* Eldritch Tales, and then *was included in Tom's collection* Songs of a Dead Dreamer, *published and illustrated by Harry Morris, whose magazine* Nyctalops *appears too seldom but is invariably worth the wait between issues.*

The girl who came into my office Wednesday for a session at two o'clock said her name was Amy Locher. (And didn't you once tell me that long ago you had a doll with this same first name?) Under the present circumstances I don't think it too gross a violation of professional ethics to use the subject's real name in describing her case to you. Certainly there's something more than simple ethics between us, *ma chere amie.* Besides, I understood from Miss Locher that you recommended me to her. This didn't seem necessarily ominous at first; perhaps, I speculated, your relationship with the girl was such that made it awkward for you to take her on as one of your own patients. Actually it's still not clear to me, my love, just how deeply you can be implicated in the overall experience I had with the petite Miss L. So you'll have to forgive any stupidities of mine, which may crudely crop up in the body of this correspondence.

My first impression of Miss Locher, as she positioned herself almost sidesaddle in a leather chair before me, was that of a tense and disturbed but basically efficient and self-seeking young woman. She was dressed and accessorized, I noticed, in much the classic style, which you normally favor. I won't go into our first-visit preliminaries here (though we can discuss these and other matters at dinner this Saturday if only you are willing). After a brief while we zeroed in on the girl's immediate impetus for consulting me. This involved, as you may or may not know, a distressing dream she had recently suffered. What will follow, as I have composed them from my tape of the September 10th session, are the events of that dream.

In the dream our subject has entered into a new life, at least to the extent that she holds down a different job from her waking one. She had already informed me that for some five years she'd worked as a secretary for a tool and die firm. (And could this possibly be *your* delicate touch? Tooling into oblivion.) However, her working day in the dream finds her as a long-time employee of a fashionable clothes shop. Like those state witnesses the government wishes to hide with new identities, she has been outfitted by the dream with what seems to be a mostly tacit but somehow complete biography; a marvelous trick of the mind, this. It appears that the duties of her new job require her to change the clothes of the mannikins in the front window, this according to some mysterious and unfathomable schedule. She in fact feels as if her entire existence is slavishly given over to doing nothing but dressing and undressing these dummies. She is profoundly dissatisfied with her lot, and the mannikins become the focus of her animus.

Such is the general background presupposed by the dream, which now begins in proper. On a particularly gloomy day in her era of thralldom, our dummy dresser approaches her work. She is resentful and frightened, the latter emotion an irrational "given" at this point in the dream. An awesome load of new clothes is waiting to attire a window full of naked mannikins. Their unwarm, uncold bodies repel her touch. (Note this rare awareness of temperature in a dream, albeit neutral.) She bitterly surveys the ranks of crayon-like faces and then says: "Time to stop dancing and get dressed, sleeping beauties." These words are spoken without spontaneity, as if ritually used to inaugurate each dressing session. But the dream changes

before the dresser is able to put one stitch on the dummies, who stare at nothing with "anticipating" eyes.

The working day is now finished. She has returned to her small apartment, where she retires to bed... and has a dream. (This dream is that of the mannikin dresser and not hers, she emphatically pointed out!)

The mannikin dresser dreams she is in her bedroom. But what she now thinks of as her "bedroom" is from all appearances actually an archaically furnished hall with the dimensions of a small theater. The room is dimly lit by some jeweled lamps along the walls, the lights shining "with a strange glaziness" upon an intricately patterned carpet and upon the massive pieces of antique and highly varnished furniture around the room. She perceives the objects of the scene more as pure ideas than physical things, for details are blurry and there are many shadows. One thing, though, she visualizes quite clearly as the dominant feature of the room: there is a wall that from the floor to the lofty ceiling is completely missing. In place of the absent wall is a view of star-clustered blackness, which she sees either through a great window or irrationally in the depths of an equally great mirror. In any case, this maze of stars and blackness appears as an enormous mural and suggests an uncertain location for a room formerly thought to be nestled at the cozy crossroads of well-known coordinates. Now it is truly just a lost point within an unknown universe of sleep.

The dreamer is positioned almost on the opposite side of the room from the brink of the starry abyss. Sitting on the edge of an armless, backless couch of complex brocade, she stares and waits "without breath or heartbeat," these functions being quite unnecessary to her dream self. Everything is in silence. This silence, however, is somehow charged with strange currents of force, which she can't really explain, an insane physics electrifying the atmosphere with demonic powers lurking just beyond the threshold of sensory perception. All is perceived with, elusive dream senses.

Then a new feeling enters the dream, one slightly more tangible. There seems to be an iciness drifting in from the area of the great mirror or window, perhaps now merely a windowless aperture looking out on the chilly void. Suddenly our dreamer experiences a cumulative terror of everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen to her. Without

moving from her place on that uncomfortable couch, she visually searches the room for clues to the source of her terror. Many areas are inaccessible to her sight -- like a picture that has been scribbled out in places -- but she sees nothing specifically frightening and is relieved for a moment. Then her horror begins anew when she realizes for the first time that she hasn't looked behind her, and indeed she seems physically unable to do so now.

Something is back there. She feels this to be a horrible truth. She *almost* knows what the thing is, but afflicted with some kind of oneiric aphasia she cannot articulate any words or clear ideas to herself. She can only wait, hoping that sudden shock will soon bring her out of the dream, for she is now aware that "she is dreaming," for some reason thinking of herself in the third person.

The words "she is dreaming" somehow form a ubiquitous motif for the present situation: as a legend written somewhere at the bottom of the dream, as echoing voices bouncing here and there around the room, as a motto printed upon fortune cookie-like strips of paper and hidden in bureau drawers, and as a broken record repeating itself on an ancient Victrola inside the dreamer's head. Then all the words of this monotonous slogan gather from their diverse places and like an alighting flock of birds settle in the area behind the dreamer's back. There they twitter for a moment, as upon the frozen shoulders of a statue in a park. This is actually the way it seems to the dreamer, including the statue comparison. Something of a statuesque nature is back there.

Approaching her. Something that is radiating a searing field of tension, coming closer, its great shadow falling across and enlarging her own mere upon the floor. Still she cannot turn around, cannot move her body, which is stiff-jointed and rigid. Perhaps she can scream, she thinks, and makes an attempt to do so. But this fails, because by then mere is already a firm and tepid hand that has covered her mouth from behind. The fingers on her lips feel like thick, naked crayons. Then she sees a long slim arm extending itself out over her left shoulder, and a hand that is holding some filthy rags before her eyes and shaking them, "making them dance." And at that moment a dry sibilant voice whispers into her ear: "It's time to get dressed, little dolling."

She tries to look away, her eyes being the only things she can still move. Now, for the first time, she notices that all around me room -- in the shadowed places -- are people dressed as dolls. Their forms are collapsed, their mourns opened wide. They do not look as if they are still alive. Some of them have actually become dolls, their flesh no longer supple and their eyes having lost the appearance of moistness. Others are at various intermediate stages between humanness and dollhood. With horror, the dreamer now becomes aware that her own mouth is opened wide and will not close.

But at last, through the power of her fear, she is able to turn around and face her menacer. At this crescendo of the dream she awakes. She does not, however, awake in the bed of the mannikin dresser in her first and outer dream, but instead finds herself directly transported into the tangled, though real, bedcovers of her secretary self. Not exactly sure where or who she is for a moment, her first impulse on awaking is to complete the movement she began in the dream -- that is, turning around to look behind her. The hypnopompic hallucination that followed she claims as a "strong motivating factor" in her seeking the powers of a psychiatrist. For when she turned around in her bed, there was more to see than a dumb headboard with a blank wall above. Projecting out of that moon-whitened wall was the anterior half of a head, the face upon it that of a female mannikin. And what particularly disturbed her about this illusion (and here we go deeper into already dubious realms) was that the head didn't melt away into the background of the wall the way other post-dream projections she'd seen in the past had done; but instead, this protruding head, in one smooth movement, *withdrew* back into the wall. Her screams summoned a few unsympathetic eavesdroppers from neighboring apartments.

End of dream and related experiences.

Now, my darling, you can probably imagine my reaction to the above psychic yarn.-Every loose skein I followed led me back to you. The character of Miss Locher's dream is strongly reminiscent, in both mood and scenario, of matters you have been exploring for some years now. I'm referring, of course, to the all-around astral uncanniness of Miss Locher's dream and how eerily it echoes certain notions (very well, *theories)* that in

my opinion have become altogether too central to your *oeuvre* as well as to your *vie.* Specifically I mean those "other worlds" you say you've detected through a combination of occult studies and depth analysis.

Let me digress for a brief lecture apropos of the preceding.

It's not that I object to your delving into speculative models of reality, sweetheart, but why this particular one? Why posit these "little zones," as I've heard you call them, having such hideous attributes, or should I say anti-attributes (to keep up with your lingo). To whimsically joke about them, as I've heard you do, with phrases like "pockets of interference" and "cosmic static," belies your talents as a thinker in general. And the rest of it: the hyper-uncanniness, the warped relationships that are supposed to obtain in these places, the "games with reality," and all the other transcendent nonsense. I realize that psychology has charted some awfully weird areas in its maps of the mind, but you've gone so far into ultramental hinterlands of metaphysics that I fear you will not return (at least not with your reputation intact).

To speak of your ideas with regard to Miss Locher's dream, you can see the connections, especially in the tortuous and twisting plot of her narrative. But I'll tell you when these connections really struck me with a hammer blow. It was just after she had related her dream to me. She was now riding the saddle of her chair in the normal position, and she made a few remarks obviously intended to convey the full extent of her distress. I'm sure she thought it de rigueur to tell me that after her dream episode she began entertaining doubts concerning who she really was. Secretary? Attirer of mannikins? Other? Other other? She knew, of course, the identity of her genuine, factual self; it was just some "new sense of unreality" that undermined complete assurance in this matter. (So what else is newrotic?)

Surely you can see how the above identity tricks fit in with those "harassments of the self that you say are one of the characteristic happenings in these zones of yours. And just what are the boundaries of self? Is there a communion of all things or just some things? How do animate and inanimate relate? Really boring... zzzzz.

It all reminds me of that trite little fable of the Chinese (Chuang Tzu?) who dreamed he was a butterfly but upon waking affected not to know whether he was a man who'd dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterly now dreaming, etc. The question is, "Do things like butterflies dream?" (Ans.: no. Recall the lab studies on the subject, if you will for once.) The issue is ended right there. However -- I'm sure you would continue -- suppose the dreamer is not a man or butterfly, but both... or neither, something else altogether. Or suppose... really we could go on and on like this, and we have. Possibly the most repellent concept you've developed on this subject is that which you call "divine masochism," or the doctrine of a Bigger Self terrorizing its little splinter selves, precisely that Something Else Altogether scarifying the man-butterfly with uncanny suspicions that there's a game going on over its collective head.

The trouble with all this, my dear, is the way you're so convinced of its objective reality, and how you sometimes manage to infect others with your peculiar convictions. Me, for instance. After hearing Miss Locher tell her dream story, I found myself unconsciously analyzing it much as you might have. Her multiplication of roles (including the role reversal with the mannikin) really put me in mind of some divine being that was splintering and scaring itself to relieve its cosmic ennui, as indeed a few of the more conventional gods of world religion supposedly do. I also thought of your "divinity of the dream," that thing which is all-powerful in its own realm. Contemplating the realm of Miss Locher's dream, I came to deeply feel that old truism of a solipsistic dream deity commanding all it sees, all of which is only itself. And a corollary to solipsism even occurred to me: if in any dream of a universe one has to *always* allow that there is another, waking universe, and then the problem becomes, as with our self-scaring Chinese, knowing when one is actually dreaming and what form the waking self may have; and this one can *never* know. The fact that the overwhelming majority of thinkers reject any doctrine of solipsism suggests, perhaps, the basic horror and disgusting unreality of its implications. And after all, the horrific feeling of unreality is much more prevalent (to certain people) in what we call human "reality" than in human dreams, where everything is absolutely real.

See what you've done to me! For reasons that you well know, I always try to argue your case, my love. I can't help myself. But I don't think it's right to be exerting your influence upon innocents like Miss Locher. I should tell you that I hypnotized the girl. Her unconscious testimony seems very much to incriminate you. She almost demanded the hypnosis, feeling this to be an easy way of unveiling the source of her problems. And because of her frantic demands, I obliged her. A serendipitous discovery ensued.

She was an excellent subject. In hypnosis we restricted ourselves to penetrating the mysteries of her dream. I had her recount the events of the dream with the more accurate memory of her hypnotized state. Her earlier version was amazingly factual, only one thing missing, which I'll get to in a moment. I asked her to elaborate on her feelings in the dream and any sense of meaning she experienced. Her response to these questions was more in the incoherent language of delirium than literal sense, or even dream logic. She said some quite horrible things about life and lies and "this dream of flesh." I don't think I need expand on the chilling nonsense she uttered, for I've heard you say much the same in one of your "states." (Really, the way you dwell on and in your zones of the metaphysically flayed self is appalling.)

And you, my dear, were present in Miss Locher's hypnotic statement in more than just spirit. That little thing which Miss Locher mentioned only under hypnosis, and which I temporarily omitted above, was a very telling piece of info. It told on you. For when my patient first described the scenes of her dream drama to me, she had forgotten -- or just neglected to mention -- the presence of another character hidden in the background. This character was her boss at the clothes store and proprietor of the nameless establishment, played by a certain lady psychoanalyst. Not that you were ever on stage, even in a cameo appearance. But the hypnotized Miss Locher did remark in passing on the identity of the employer of her oneiric self, this being one of the many underlying suppositions of the dream.

I found this revelation immensely helpful in coordinating my and my patient's separate items of evidence against you. The nature of the evidence, however, was such that I could not rule out the possibility of a conspiracy on your and Miss Locher's part. So I refrained from asking her anything

about the relationship between you two, and I didn't inform her of what she said about you under hypnosis. My assumption was that she was guilty until proven otherwise.

Alternatives did occur to me, though, especially when I realized Miss Locher's extraordinary susceptibility to hypnosis. Isn't it just possible, sweet love, that Miss Locher's incredible dream was induced by one of those post-hypnotic suggestions, which you're so good at? I know that lab experiments in this area are sometimes eerily successful, and the eerie is, without argument, your specialty. Still another possibility involves the study of dream telepathy, in which you have no small interest. So what were you doing the night Miss Locher underwent her dream ordeal? (You weren't with me, I know that!) And how many of those eidola on my poor patient's mental screen were images projected from an outside source? These are just some of the bizarre questions, which lately seem so necessary to ask.

But the answers to such questions would still only establish your means in this crime. What about your motive? That I know very well, too well. It seems there is nothing you won't do to impose your ideas upon common humanity -- deplorably on your patients, obnoxiously on your colleagues, and affectionately (I hope) on me. I know it must be hard for a lonely visionary like yourself to remain mute and ignored, but you've chosen such an eccentric path to follow that I fear there are few spirits brave enough to accompany you into those zones of deception and pain, at least not voluntarily.

Which brings us back to Miss Locher. By the end of our first, and only, session I still wasn't sure whether she was a willing or unwilling agent of yours; hence, I kept mum, very mum, about anything concerning you. Neither did she mention you in any significant way, except of course unconsciously in hypnosis. At any rate, she certainly appeared to be a genuinely disturbed young lady, and she asked me to prescribe for her. As Dr. Bovary tried to assuage the oppressive dreams of his wife with a prescription of valerian and camphor baths, I supplied Miss Locher with a program for serenity that included Valium and companionship (the latter of which I also recommend for us, dolling). Then we made a date for the following Wednesday at the same tune. Miss Locher seemed most grateful,

though not enough, according to my secretary, to pay up what she owed. And wait till you find out where she wanted us to send the bill.

The following week Miss Locher did not appear for her appointment. This did not really alarm me, for, as you know many patients --armed with a script for tranquilizers and a single experience of therapy -- decide they don't need any more help. But by men I had developed such a personal interest in Miss Locher's case that I was seriously disappointed at the prospect of not being able to pursue it further.

After fifteen patientless minutes had elapsed, I had my secretary call Miss Locher at the number she gave us. (With my former secretary -- poor tiling -- this would have been done automatically; so the new girl is not as good as you said she was, doctor. I shouldn't have let you insinuate her into my employ... but that's my fault, isn't it?) Maggie came into my office a few minutes later, presumably after she'd tried to reach Miss Locher. With rather cryptic impudence she suggested I dial the number myself, giving me the form containing all the information on our new patient. Then she left the room without saying another word. The nerve of that soon-to-be-unemployed girl.

I called the number -- which incidentally plays the song about Mary's lamb on the push button phone in my office -- and it rang twice before someone answered. This someone had the voice of a young woman but was not our Miss Locher. In any case, die way this woman answered the phone told me I had a wrong number (the right wrong number). Nevertheless, I asked if a Miss Locher could be reached at that number or any of its possible extensions, but the answering female's voice expressed total ignorance regarding the existence of any person by that name. I thanked her and hung up.

You will have to forgive me, my lovely, if at this point I had begun to feel like the victim of a hoax, your hoax to be exact. "Maggie," I intercommed, "how many more appointments for this afternoon?" "Just one," she immediately answered, and then without being asked to, said: "But I can cancel it if you'd like." I said I would like, that I would be gone for the rest of the afternoon.

My intention was to pay a visit on Miss Locher at the, probably also phony, address on her new patient form. I had the suspicion that the address would lead to the same geographical spot as had the electronic nexus of the false phone number. Of course I could have easily verified this without leaving my office, but knowing you, sweet one, I thought that a personal visit was warranted. And I was right.

The address was an hour's drive away. It was in a fashionable suburb on the other side of town from that fashionable suburb in which I have my office. (And I wish you would remove your own place of business from its present location, unless for some reason you need to be near a skid-row source that broadcasts on frequencies of chaos and squalor, which you'd probably claim.) I parked my big black car on the street I was looking for, which also turned out to be the main street of the suburb's shopping district. Harwell Ave. is its name, as you know.

This was last Wednesday, and if you'll recall it was quite an unusual day (an accomplishment I do *not* list among all your orchestrated connivings of my adventure). It was dim and moody most of the morning, and so prematurely dark by late afternoon that there were stars seemingly visible in the sky. Presumably a storm was imminent -- though I don't recollect our really having one -- for the air was appropriately galvanized with a pre-deluge suspensefulness. The display windows of stores had on their nightlights, and one jewelry sellers I passed twinkled with electric glory in the corner of my eye. Shivering in the stillness were the little leaves upon a row of curbside trees, each slender trunk emerging from a complex mosaic planted in the sidewalk.

Of course, there's no farmer need to describe the atmosphere of a place you've visited many times, dear love. But I just wanted to show how sensitive I was to a certain kind of portentous -mood, and how ripe I'd become for the staged antics to follow. Very good, doctor!

Distance-wise, I only had to walk a few gloomy blocks before arriving at the address I sought, the address purported to be the home of our Miss L. By then it was pretty clear what I would find. There were no surprises so far. When I looked up at the neon-inscribed name of the place, I heard a young woman's telephone voice whispering the words into my ear:

Mademoiselle Fashions. A fake French accent here, S.V.P. And this is the store -- no? -- where it seems you acquire so many of your own lovely ensembles. But I'm jumping ahead with my expectations.

What I did not expect were the sheer *lengths* to which you would go in setting up a weird experience and revelation for your beloved. Was this, I pray, done to bring us closer in the divine bonds of weirdness? Anyway, I saw what you wanted me to see, or what I thought you wanted me to see, or some combination of the two, in the window of Mile. Fashions.

The thing was even wearing the same plaid-skirted outfit as, or one very similar to, the one worn by Miss Locher on her only visit to my office. And I have to admit that I was a bit shocked -- perhaps attributable in part to the strange climatic conditions of the day -- when I saw the head of the thing. Then again, I was looking for a resemblance and possibly made myself see an exaggerated likeness between Miss Locher (your fellow conspirator, whether she knows it or not) and the figure in the window. You can probably guess what I noticed, or thought I noticed, about the figure's eyes -- what you would have had me think of as a partially human *moistness,* like those metamorphosizing things in Miss Locher's dream.

Unfortunately, I was unable to linger long enough to positively confirm the above perception, for a medium-intensity shower began to descend at that point. The rain sent me running to a nearby phone booth, where I had some business to conduct anyway. Retrieving the number of the clothes store from my memory, I phoned them for the second time that afternoon. That was easy. What was not quite as easy was imitating your voice, my high-pitched love, and asking if the store's accounting department had mailed out a bill that month for my, I mean your, charge account. My impersonation of you must have been very good, for the voice on the phone reminded me that I'd already taken care of all my recent expenditures. You thanked the salesgirl for this information, apologizing for your forgetfulness, and then said good-bye. Perhaps I should have asked the girl if she was the one who helped rig up that mannikin in the window to look like Miss Locher, if indeed the situation was not the other way around. In any case, I did establish a definite link, of which I was almost sure beforehand, between you and the clothes store. It seemed you might have accomplices anywhere,

and to tell you the truth I was beginning to feel a bit paranoid standing in that little phone booth.

The rain was coming down even harder as I made a mad dash back to my black sedan. A bit soaked, I sat in the car for a few moments wiping off my rain-spotted glasses with a handkerchief. I said I was becoming a bit paranoid and what follows proves it. While sitting there without my glasses on, I thought I saw something move in the rearview mirror. My visual vulnerability, combined with the claustrophobic feeling of being in a car with rain-blinded windows, together added up to a momentary but very definite panic on my part. Of course I quickly put my glasses on and found there was nothing whatever in the backseat. But the point is that I had to check in order to relieve my spasm of anxiety. You had succeeded, my love, in getting me to experience a moment of self-terror, and in that moment I, too, became your accomplice against myself. Bravo!

You have indeed succeeded -- assuming all my inferences thus far are for the most part true -- perhaps more than you know or ever intended. Having confessed all this, possibly now I can get to the *real* focus and "motivating factor" of this correspondence. This has much less to do with A. Locher man it does with us, dearest. Please try to be sympathetic and, above all, patient.

I have not been well lately, and you well know the reason why. This business with Miss Locher, far from bringing us to a more intimate understanding of each other, has only made the situation worse. Horrible nightmares have been plaguing me every night. Me, of all people! And they are directly due to the well-intentioned (I think) influence of you and Miss L. I'll describe one of these nightmares for you, and therefore describe them all. This will be the last dream story, I promise.

In the dream I am in my bedroom, sitting upon my unmade bed and wearing my pajamas (Oh, will you never see them). The room is partially illuminated by beams from a streetlight shining in through the window from outside. And it also seems to me that a whole galaxy of constellations, although not actually witnessed firsthand, are contributing their light to the scene, a ghastly glowing which unnaturally blanches the entire upstairs of

the house. I have to use the bathroom and walk sleepily out to the hallway... where I get the shock of my life.

In the whitened hallway -- I cannot say *brightened,* because it is almost as if a very fine and luminous powder coats everything -- are these things lying up and down the floor, on the upper landing of the stairway, and even upon the stairs themselves as they disappear into the darker regions below. These things are people dressed as dolls, or else dolls made up to look like people dressed as dolls. I remember being confused about which it was.

But people or dolls, their heads are all turned in my direction as I emerge from the bedroom, and their eyes shine in the white darkness. Frozen -- yes, with terror -- I merely return a fixed gaze, for some reason wondering if my eyes are shining the same as theirs. Then one of the doll people, slouching against the wall on my near left, turns its head laboriously upon a stiffened neck and looking upward speaks to me. Its voice is an horrific cackling parody of speech, but even more horrible are its words. It says: "Become as we are, sweetie. Die *into* us." Suddenly I begin to feel very weak, as if my life were being drained out of me. Summoning all my powers of movement, I manage to rush back to my bed to end the dream.

I don't wake up until the next morning, and even then my heart pounds like anything. This very much disturbs me, for I've read studies of the relationship between nightmares and heart attacks. For some poor souls that imaginary incubus sitting upon their chest can do very real harm. And I do not want to become one of these cases.

You can help me, sweetheart. I know you didn't intend it to turn out this way but that elaborate joke you perpetrated with the help of Miss Locher has really gotten to me. Consciously, of course, I still uphold the criticism I've already expressed about the basic silliness of your work. Unconsciously, however, you seem to have awakened me to a stratum *(zone,* you would say) of uncanny terror in my mind-soul. I will at least admit mat your ideas form a powerful psychic metaphor, though no more than that. Which is quite enough, isn't it? It's certainly quite enough to inspire the writing of this letter, in which I now beg you to get in touch with me so that we can resolve this whole situation. I can't go on like this! You have strange powers over me, as if you didn't already know it. Please

release me from your spell, and let's begin a normal romance. Who really gives a damn about the metaphysics of invisible realms anyway? It's only emotions, not abstractions, which count. Love and terror are the true realities, whatever the unknowable mechanics are that turns their wheels, and our own.

In Miss Locher I believe you sent me a concrete message of your deepest convictions, a love note if you will. But suppose I start admitting weird things about Miss L? Suppose I admit that she was somehow just a dream. (Then she must have been my secretary's dream too, for she saw her.) Suppose I even admit that Miss Locher was not a girl but actually a multi-selved *thing* -- *pan* Man, part mannikin -- and with your assistance dreamed itself for a time into existence, reproduced itself in human form just as we reproduce ourselves with an infinite variety of images and shapes, including mannikins? You would like to have me think of things like this. You would like to have me think of all the mysterious connections between different things. So what if there are? I don't care anymore.

Forget other selves. Forget the third (fourth, nth) person view of life; only first and second persons are important (I and thou). And by all means forget dreams. I, for one, know I'm not a dream. I am real, Dr. ----. (There, how do you like being anonymized?) So please be so kind as to acknowledge my existence.

It is now after midnight, and I dread going to sleep and having another of those nightmares. You can save me from this fate, if only you can find it in your heart to do so. And you must hurry. Time is running out for us, my love, just as these last few waking moments are now running out for me. It is late in the night but still not too late for our love. Please don't destroy everything for us. You will only hurt yourself. And despite your high-flown theory of masochism, there is really nothing divine about it. So no more of your tricks with strange places and communications. Be simple. Good night, and then. Good

Night, my foolish love. Hear me now. Sleep your singular sleep and dream of the many, the others. They are also part of you, part of us. Die into them and leave me in peace. I will come for you later, and then you can always be with me in a special corner all your own, just as my little Amy once was.

This is what you've wanted, and this you shall have. Die into them. Yes, die into them, you simple man, you fool, you lover, you silly dolling. Die with a nice bright gleam in your eyes.

Marilyn and the King

Ruth Berman

Ruth Berman only occasionally contributes to the small magazines, the majority of her fiction appearing in the major magazines and anthologies. Among the littler journals blessed with her talents are Space & Time, Fantasy & Terror, *and* Fantasy Macabre *including, in the latter, translations from the French. Her perfect horror tale "Marilyn and the King" appeared only in the surrealist journal* Grimoire, *edited by Tom Wiloch. That magazine's suspension was a real loss, as it was a unique voice in the field, much to be lamented, one of the few journals cited in Sullivan's* Encyclopedia of Horror. *Ruth's story is a fine sampling of that magazine's overall excellence.*

It was mostly Howdy-Doody's fault. Marilyn did not have much idea what kind of a puppet Howdy had been, though from die name she imagined him chiefly as an immense right hand. But Poppa had loved the show when he was little, except that Poppa's parents thought that puppets were dolls, and dolls were not for little boys.

So they went to the store one day and bought a puppet. Not a Howdy puppet. Stores didn't carry those nowadays, said the salesclerk. She was bright and cheerful, except for the abstracted look that came of chewing gum. Poppa didn't like the movie-related, and Punch-and-Judy, and animal puppets that were on display up front. "Something special," he said. "Something off the usual track."

The salesclerk chewed, and fiddled with her necklace. It was a pendant with a stone like a full moon. Crescents of light moved back and forth in it as she thought. "Something made by hand?" she offered.

Poppa thought that sounded good.

The salesclerk brought out a puppet half as big as Marilyn. He had a Rumpelstiltskin sort of face, the features ugly and funny, with his mouth open as if he were shouting. He wore black robes and a silver crown, with a stone in it like the salesclerk's necklace and another on a ring on his tiny wooden forefinger. "That's the elf king," she said, and smiled at him fondly.

Poppa was taken aback at first. He wasn't at all a friendly, Howdying sort of puppet. But he was carved in finer detail than the rest, and his clothes were better tailored, and he wasn't like anything else there. So they took him.

The salesclerk nodded when she saw the address on the check. "He's probably going home," she said. "When that cedar there was cut down, a lot of the wood was used locally."

"A cedar?" said Poppa.

"Used to grow at your place," said the salesclerk. "The old owners took it down -- said it kept the apple tree from good bearing. Cedar and apple are always at odds."

"Our apple tree has nice apples," said Marilyn. "And a swing."

"Come along, Marilyn," said Poppa. And they took the king home with them.

The king was too tall for Marilyn to operate from the ground. She had to stand on a chair to get enough height to hold the control bars. A big cardboard box with one side open and the top cut off made a fine stage for the king. With Poppa directing and Momma for the audience, Marilyn gave her first performance.

It didn't go very well. When she tried to waggle her middle finger to move the jaws, the rest of her fingers waggled, too, and threw the arms around. The bar with the strings for the legs was hard to hold. Somehow she kept jerking it, and the legs kept getting caught in the other strings. Momma said it was a good start, and applauded.

Poppa was very patient. He would put his hand over Marilyn's hand and help her practice moving one finger at a time. She asked him to take the king and show her, but he said it wasn't a sort of thing that you did by looking at it. Your hands had to do it, and hands learn by feeling where *the* muscles go. When he got home from work he'd call Marilyn in, and they'd practice.

Actually, it took him kind of a lot of calling to get her in. The weather was sunny and gentle, and Marilyn was usually swinging and trying to spot the tiny green bits of apples growing on the twigs above her feet. She didn't like to stop and come in.

The annoying thing was that it never seemed to go any better. The strings were always twisted, and after she worked them straight and got started they got twisted up again as she tried to operate the king. The king, with his open mouth, seemed to be laughing at her silently from the floor when the bars slipped out of her hands. The muscles in her fingers hurt.

The days grew longer, and there was more time after school when Marilyn could be outside, swinging, and instead she was inside, trying to get the king to dance. She could get him to bow. She could get him to kneel, sometimes, although the legs -seemed to get caught in the other strings about half the time when he got up again. She could hold him still and recite a long speech Momma found for her, the king telling about how he had heard a mermaid singing in the moonlight -- and certain stars shot madly from their spheres, to hear the sea-maid's music -- and how he sent for the flower that grew that night to help him steal a changeling child. It was hard to understand, but interesting to say, and it didn't make her hands hurt.

She gave another performance when they had a party for their friends. She did it very badly. She even had to get down and climb in the box to undo the king after she had only just had him bow to the audience, and she gave up on the dance entirely, and swayed him back and forth for a while instead.

The guests applauded, though, because they were polite. Besides, they didn't know how well or badly someone her age ought to do anything anyway, and they always acted impressed at anything their friends' kids did. It was hard to tell when they meant it, because they weren't sure themselves. And the mermaid speech went pretty well. It would have been better if a wind hadn't started blowing outside. It was loud, and some of the people couldn't hear her over it.

As she went off to bed Marilyn heard them laughing, and when she said goodnight she saw that Poppa's face was closed up. It was too bad the guests couldn't have seen a more interesting show, Marilyn thought. Hopefully, she stuck the king out at him. "Poppa, why don't you do some tricks for the people now?"

"No, you were just fine, Mar," he said, and shoved his hands in his pockets.

There was nothing for it but to hoist the king over her shoulder, grab up the strings, and go upstairs.

Marilyn brushed her teeth grudgingly and put on her pajamas. Outside the wind was louder still, and the stars disappeared. Her room faced north, and it began to get cold. She put her socks back on, and then her shoes, to get her feet warm.

A streak of lightning lit up the room, and she could see the king sneering at her in the milky light.

Marilyn jumped on him as the thunder rolled and began pulling him to pieces, bashing him against the wall.

Downstairs, people were saying it was a pity to leave so early, but they really thought they'd better be going. There was too much bustle getting them into coats and out the front door for anyone to hear the unusual thumps upstairs.

Marilyn sat back, panting, The king's arms and legs and head were all disconnected from the body, and the jaw hung dangling from the head, so that the open-mouthed smile had become an idiotic yawn. But the sections

were still connected by the strings. The silver crown swung loose on the string from the head. She could not snap the strings, and they were too tough for her to cut with her blunt scissors. It was not meant for anything much stronger than construction paper. She worked away with it at the head-string for a while without success. Another flash of lightning hit, and she could see the yard through her window, the apple tree shining into existence and out of it again in an instant.

She jerked her head resolutely, put the king down, and felt her way to her toy chest. Rummaging about in it, she found a pail, which she discarded, and under it a shovel. Although meant for sand at the beach, it was quite sturdy. She took it in her hand, put the king under her arm, and slipped down the stairs and out the back door.

She dug between fee roots of the apple tree. Above her the swing was creaking as the wind blew it about. By the time the hole was big enough, it was raining hard, and her back and knees were stiff, and her arms sore. Marilyn didn't mind. She tumbled the king into his grave. Then she stood up, trying to ease her cramped muscles, forgetting to watch her head. The swing came down on her, and her head caught in the ropes on one side. She was pulled off her feet, spinning as the wind shifted and danced her about.

They found them there in the morning.

The Area

Stefan Grabinski

> *In a finer, more aesthetic world than ours, it would be the simplest matter for a skillful translator sympathetic to, let's say, a significant author of Poland, to receive a grant substantive enough to live on for a year while undertaking a careful translation. Afterward publishers would bid for the privilege of presenting the result to an eager public. In* this *world, of course, the small presses fill the aesthetic void. Miroslaw Lipinski founded and publishes* The Grabinski Reader *to promote and publish in English the works of "the Polish Poe," Stefan Grabinski (1887-1936), called by Thomas Ligotti, "a genuine visionary of nightmare." Each issue of* The Grabinski Reader *is a revelation of morosity, beauty, and horrible adventure.*

For more than twelve years Wrzesmian had completely stopped writing. After putting out in 1900 the fourth in his series of original, insanely strange works, he became silent and irrevocably removed himself from the world scene. From that time on he didn't touch a pen, he didn't even express himself with a trivial verse. He wasn't wrested from silence by his friends' urgings, nor was he stirred by the attentive voices of critics, who for a lengthy interval advanced opinions concerning some epic-scaled new work. These anticipations passed, and nothing was heard from Wrzesmian.

Slowly an obvious opinion, as bright and clear as the sun, began to form concerning him: he had depleted himself prematurely. "Yes, yes," sadly nodded the heads of literary connoisseurs, "he expressed himself too quickly. He didn't understand the economy of production; he touched on a bit too many issues in one creation. He actually offended with his excess of ideas, which, condensed in compact summaries, oppressed the vigorous contents. The potion was too strong; it deserved, rather, to be given in

smaller, diluted doses. He damaged his own reputation: he ran out of subject matter."

These judgments reached Wrzesmian, but they didn't elicit the slightest response. Consequently, his speedy impoverishment was believed in, and the world was tidied up with him. Besides, new talents emerged, new figures appeared on the horizon, and finally he was left in peace.

And, indeed, the majority of people were glad with this turn of events. Wrzesmian wasn't too popular. The works of this strange man, saturated with rampant fantasy, filled with strong individualism, gave an unfavorable impression by turning upside down accepted aesthetic-literary theories, and annoyed scholars by ruthlessly mocking established pseudo-truths. His output was eventually acknowledged as the product of a sick imagination, the bizarre work of an eccentric, maybe even a madman. Wrzesmian was an inconvenience for various reasons, and he disturbed unnecessarily, stirring peaceful waters. That's why his premature waning was received with a feeling of secret relief; people heaved out a sigh.

And no one supposed for a moment that the verdict of abatement could be fundamentally false, that the cause for withdrawing from the world scene did not necessarily have to be depletion and decrepitude. However, Wrzesmian was utterly indifferent as to what legend would arise about him. He considered the whole affair personal and private, and never thought of extricating himself from the fallacy.

And why should he? If what he wished for would realize itself, the future would show the truth and burst the hardened shell he had been submerged in; whereas if his dreams didn't materialize, he would be less than convincing, exposing himself only to jeers and insults. Therefore it was better to wait and be silent.

For Wrzesmian was not lacking in breath and force, but was seized with new desires. He wanted to attain stronger means of expression, and he began to aim for more formidable creative realizations. The word was already not enough for him: he was searching for something more direct; he was looking about for better artistic material to realize his thoughts.

The situation was so tied up with this, the dreams so little practical, that the path of creation he was treading departed far from the beaten track.

Ultimately the majority of works of art revolve, more or less, in a realistic area, reproducing or transforming the sights of life. Events, though fabricated, are only its analogy, intensified, admittedly, through exaltation or pathos, and therefore possible at some moment in time. Similar scenes could have once occurred in reality, they can appear sometime in the future, nothing prevents a belief in their possibility -- reason doesn't rebel against accessible fabrications. Even most works by fantasists do not exclude probable realization, unless they show an inclination toward pranks or the heedless smirk of a skillful juggler.

But in Wrzesmian's case the matter presented itself a little differently. The whole of his strange, enigmatic work was one great fiction. For naught had the pack of critics, cunning like foxes, labored in search of so-called "literary influences," "analogies," "foreign currents" that would, even if roughly, give a clue to the impenetrable castle of Wrzesmian's poetry; for naught had shrewd reviewers run for help to learned psychiatric experts, sifted through piles of all sorts of works, immersed themselves in encyclopedias: the writings of Wrzesmian came out victorious over successful interpretation, even more mysterious, bewildering, dangerous, unfathomable than before. A gloomy spell exuded from them, an alluring, vertiginous, bone-chilling depth.

In spite of their emphatically absolute fictitiousness, not even touching real life in one spot, Wrzesmian's writings jolted, puzzled, amazed: people dared not go past them with a disregardful shrug of the shoulders. Something resided in these short and compact bullet-like works, something riveted the attention, fettered the soul, some powerful suggestion rose from these incisive digests written in a seemingly reserved style -- as though a reporter's, as though a teacher's -- under which pulsated the fervor of a fanatic.

For Wrzesmian had believed in what he had been writing; for he had acquired as time went on the firm conviction that any thought, even the most audacious, that any fiction, even the most insane, can materialize, that one day it will live to see its fulfillment in space and time.

"No person thinks in vain; no thought, even the strangest, disappears fruitlessly," he used to repeat many times to his circle of friends and acquaintances.

And it seemed that precisely this belief in the materialization of fiction caused a hidden flame to flow through the arteries of his works, that in spite of their apparent coldness, they penetrated to the core...

But he was never satisfied with himself. Like every sincere creator, he was constantly seeking new means of expression, ever more distinct symbols that would give his thoughts their best possible accuracy. Finally, he had abandoned the word, scorning language as a trifle too crude form of expression, and he began to yearn for something more direct that would artistically and tangibly outdistance all existing attempts. It wouldn't be silence, the "resting of the word" of the symbolists; that was for him too pale, too nebulous -- and too little sincere. He wanted another realization.

What it could be, he didn't precisely know, but in its possibility he firmly believed. A few facts garnered while he still wrote and published strengthened this belief. He convinced himself even then that in spite of the imaginary character of his creations, they possessed a particular strength of flowing out onto the world and people. The crazy thoughts of Wrzesmian, coming out from the incandescent pulp of his works, seemed to have had the power of fertilizing and developing new, not hitherto known whirlpools, some demented mental monads whose manifestations would flare up unexpectedly in the acts and gestures of certain individuals, in the course of certain events.

But even this had not been enough for him. He desired realizations completely independent of the laws of reality, so free as their source: fiction; as their germ: dreams. This would be the ideal -- the absolutely highest achievement, a total expression without a shadow of insufficiency...

Wrzesmian understood, however, that such an achievement might result in his own extermination. Absolute fulfillment would also be a complete release of one's energy, therefore death through exertion, excess...

Because the ideal, as is known, is in death. A work overwhelms the author with its weight. Thoughts fully realized can become threatening and vengeful, especially thoughts that are insane. Left alone, without a point of support on a real base, they can be dangerous to the originator.

Wrzesmian had a presentment of this eventuality, but he wasn't swayed, wasn't frightened. His desire predominated above everything else...

Meanwhile the years went silently by, not bringing the dreamed-of realizations. Wrzesmian completely removed himself from the sight of people, taking up solitary residence at the outskirts of the city on a secluded suburban street mat looked onto fields and fallows. Here, closed in his two small rooms, cut off from society, he spent months and years in reading and contemplation. He slowly restricted himself to tighter circles of actual life, to which he didn't give the slightest attention, paying only minimal, unavoidable tribute. Besides, he was totally steeped in himself, in his dreams and in longing for then fulfillment. His ideas, not projected on paper as before, took on strength and juice; they swelled through non-expression of their contents. Sometimes it seemed to him that his thoughts were not abstractions but something materialistic, nearly thickened, that it would be sufficient to reach out a hand to enclose them, to seize them. But the illusion quickly blew away, leaving in its place bitter disappointment.

Yet he didn't lose heart. In order not to diffuse himself too much with die sights of the outside world, he narrowed the scope of everyday perceptions to a limited number of pictures, which, constantly seen without change, day after day, through entire years, gradually entered into a circle of ideas, became commensurate with their terrain, merging with the world of dreams into one particular area.

Thus, imperceptibly, some unreachable habitat was formed, some secret oasis to which no one had access except Wrzesmian, king of the unseen islet. This *milieu,* imbibed with the ego of the dreamer, saturated with it to the brink, appeared to the uninitiated as a simple place in space; people could only perceive its exterior side, its physical existence -- but the internal pulsations of fermenting thoughts, the subtle connection these had with the personage of Wrzesmian, they failed to sense...

By odd chance the space enveloped by the mind of the fantasist, that place which he transformed into the area of his dreams, was not his home. The oasis of his fiction rose opposite his windows, on the other side of his street, in the form of a two-storied villa.

The gloomy elegance of the house riveted him for the first moment after he had occupied his new abode. At the end of a black double row of cypresses, their two lines containing a stone pathway, appeared a several-stepped terrace where a weighty, stylized double door led to the interior. Across the iron railing that surrounded the mansion, the wings of the house were losing color. Coated with a pale-greenish paint, the ill and sad outer walls peered out from the depth. From underneath the garden, treacherously concealed humidity crawled out here and there with a dark oozing. Once carefully cultivated flower borders, now chimerically bundled beds, had with time lost the distinctness of their lines. Only two eternal fountains quietly wept, shedding water from marble basins onto clusters of rich, red roses. Only a muscular Triton on the left side continually raised his hand in the same gesture of greeting to a limber Harpy who, leaning from a marble cistern on the other side, enticed him for many years with the lure of a divine body; in vain, because they were separated by the mournful cypresses...

The entirety gave the impression of dismal loneliness, abandoned by people for a long time, isolated from neighboring buildings. The villa ended the street; beyond it was not even one house; there were only wide bands of marshy meadows, tracked fields, fallows, and, in the distance, beech woods, blackening during winter, rusting during autumn...

No one had been living in the celadon villa for a number of years. The owner, some wealthy aristocrat, had long since gone abroad, leaving the house without a caretaker.

Therefore it stood neglected in the middle of the rampant garden, wasted away by the destructive work of rain, and crumbled by the malice of winds and winter blizzards.

The dreary spell that blew from this retreat strangely pulled on Wrzesmian's soul. The villa was for him an artistic symbol of the mood, which pervaded his work; gazing intently on it, he felt as if in his own home.

That is why he spent whole hours beside his window, resting on the frame and casting his meditative glance in the direction of the sad house. He especially liked to observe on lunar nights the effects evoked on the fantastic retreat by the moon's light. Nighttime, in fact, seemed to be its real element. During the day the villa was dormant as if in lifeless sleep. The entire magic hidden in its mysterious interior appeared in full only after the setting of the sun. Then the house came back to life. Some intangible tremor coursed through the sleeping hermitage, shook the cypresses solidified in mourning, rippled with sinuous lines weathered pediments and friezes...

Wrzesmian watched and lived the life of the house. Distinct thoughts were awakened within him, harmonious with the scenery across the street; pathetic tragedies were born, as strong as death, as menacing as fate; then again, some vague thoughts loomed, dimmed as if by the moon's silver patina.

Every recess became a sensory counterpart to a fiction, a lumpish realization of thoughts that clung onto ledges, roamed about solitary, empty halls, wept on terrace steps. Jumbled crazy dreams, hazy imaginings roved in wet dispersion, wandered along walls, uncertain of support. Even these found a haven. Irritated by the capriciousness of their movement, the imagination thrust them away with contempt, so that, frightened, they flowed down in filmy streams into a large moss-grown vat at the corner of the house, moving into its black body somnolently, torpidly, like rain on the late-autumn inclement days. Faint, rusty thoughts, slightly acidic...

Wrzesmian got drunk with the dismal frolics of the fantasies, letting their creations run loose. According to his liking he changed their direction or drove them away from sight, in the next moment conjuring up new replacements...

No one bothered him. Any inopportune intruder did not traverse the secluded street in the distant quarter of the city; no noisy cart interrupted the atmosphere.

Thus he had lived the last several years -- years undisturbed by the outside, but full of menace and marvels from the inside.

Until suddenly one day some changes occurred in the house across the street, instantly excising memorizations that had already started to adopt forms set by habit and practice.

It happened on a fine July evening. Sitting, as usual, by an open window, his head propped by his hand, Wrzesmian was sweeping his meditative glance about the villa and the garden. All of a sudden, looking into one of the windows in a wing of the house, he shuddered. By the windowpane, gazing stubbornly at him, was the pale face of a man. The unmoving gaze of the strange stare was sinister. Wrzesmian became seized with a vague dread. He rubbed his eyes, walked about his room a couple of times, and looked again at the window; the severe face had not disappeared, staring continually in his direction.

"Has the owner of the villa already returned?" Wrzesmian threw out the weak supposition in an undertone.

The dreary mask answered by twisting itself into a wild-ironic smile. Wrzesmian let down the shade and lit up his home: he couldn't stand the gaze any longer.

To obliterate these impressions he immersed himself in reading until midnight. At twelve he wearily raised himself from a book, and drawn by an overpowering temptation, he lifted the edge of the shade to peek out the window. And again a shudder of fear chilled him to the bone: the pale man stood continually there, without movement, by the window on the right wing. Illuminated by the bright magnesium shine of the moon, he disabled Wrzesmian with his gaze. Uneasy, Wrzesmian returned the shade to its position and tried to fall asleep.

Unsuccessfully. His imagination, imbued with dread, didn't give him rest, tormenting him unbearably. Not until morning did he fall into a short, nervous sleep full of nightmares and visions. When he woke up around noon, with a giddy head, his first thought was to look at the villa's windows. He breathed out a sigh of relief: the obstinate face was gone.

Throughout the entire day there was peace. But upon evening he saw by a window on the first floor the mask of some woman staring at him, her

unfurled hair bordering a face already withered but with traces of onetime great beauty, a face maddened by a pair of wild, intent eyes. And she was looking at him through frenzied pupils with the same severe gaze as that of her companion from the right wing. Both seemed not to know anything about their coexistence in the strange house. They were joined only by their menacing gesture turned toward Wrzesmian...

And again after a sleepless night, interrupted by looking at his persecutors, a day free of masks followed. But as soon as dusk was entering into its secret conspiracy with the night, a third new figure bloomed by a window, not retreating until dawn. So in the space of several days all the windows of the villa were filled up with sinister faces. From behind every window looked out some despairing eyes, some ovals marked with suffering or madness. The house gazed at him with the eyes of maniacs, the grimace of lunatics; it grinned toward him with the smile of the demented. Not one of these people had he seen in his life, and yet he somehow knew all of them. But from where, he knew not. Each one of them had a different expression, but all were united in their threatening deportment toward him; apparently he" was considered there as a common enemy. Their hatred terrified and at the same time pulled in a magnetic manner. And a strange thing: in the deepest layers of his mind, he understood then-anger and acknowledged its justness.

And they, as if solving him from afar, gathered certainty of expression, and their masks became cruder with every day.

Then one August night, while he was leaning out of his window, enduring the crucifying gazes directed at him from hateful eyes, the immobile faces suddenly became animated; in each flashed simultaneously the same will. Hundreds of arms, thin as tibias, raised themselves in a movement of command, and scores of pale hands performed an infliction of fingers in a characteristic gesture...

Wrzesmian understood: he was being summoned inside. As if hypnotized he leaped over the windowsill, crossed the narrow strip of street, jumped over the railing, and began to walk along the alley to the villa...

It was four in the morning, the hour before dawn's tremblings. The magnesium jets of the moon bathed the house in a silver whirlpool, lured long shadows from curves. The path was bright, dazzling white in the midst of sorrowful shrub walls. Hollowly echoed the distinct steps on stone slabs, silently rippled the fountains, mysteriously drizzled the bent waters... He went up the terrace and jerked strongly on the door handle: the door gave way. He walked along a lengthy corridor of two rows of Corinthian columns. The nocturnal dusk brightened the glory of the moon, which, pouring through a stained-glass panel at the end of the gallery, unreeled green fables onto porphyritic floor tiles...

Suddenly, as he was walking, some figure emerged from behind the shaft of column and followed him. Wrzesmian shuddered but silently went on. A couple of steps further a new figure detached itself from a niche between two columns; after it, a third figure, and a tenth -- all followed him. He wanted to turn back, but they blocked his way. So he crossed the column forest and swerved to his right, into some circular hall. Here it was bright from the moon's shimmering and full of some sort of people. He slipped between them, looking for an exit. In vain! They surrounded him with an increasingly dense, obtrusive circle. From pale, bloodless lips flowed out a menacing whisper:

"It's him! It's him!"

He stopped and looked defiantly at the throng:

"What do you want from me?"

"Your blood! We want your blood! Blood! Blood!"

"What do you want it for?"

"We want to live! We want to live! Why do you call us out from the chaos of nonexistence and condemn us to be miserable half-corporal vagrants? Look at how weak and pale we are!"

"Mercy!" he wailed, desperately throwing himself toward a winding staircase in depth of the hall.

"Hold him! Surround him! Surround him!"

With the speed of a madman he ascended the stairs to the upper floor and burst into some medieval chamber. But his oppressors entered right after him. Their slender arms, their fluid, mistily damp hands joined in a macabre file without exit.

"What did I do to you?"

"We want full life! You confined us, you wretch, to this house! We want to leave here and go out into the world, released from this place to live in freedom! Your blood will fortify us, your blood will give us strength! Strangle him! Strangle him!"

Thousands of hungry mouths extended toward him, thousands of pale suckers...

In a crazy reflex he flung himself toward the window in order to jump out. A legion of slimy, cold hands seized him by the middle, dug crooked finger hooks into his hair, coiled his neck... He struggled once, twice. Someone's fingernails cut into his larynx, someone's lips fastened to his temple...

He staggered, supported himself on the embrasure with his shoulders, inclined backward... His convulsively extended arms spread out in a sacrificial movement; a weary smile of fulfillment crept to his whitened lips -- he was already dead...

At the moment when the interior cooled with the agonizing throes of Wrzesmian's body, the predawn silence was interrupted by a dull plop. It came from the vat at the corner of the house. The surface of the water, moldy from green scum, seethed -- inside the rotten barrel, encompassed by rusty hoops, swirls rose, refuse undulated, sediment gurgled. A couple of large, distended bubbles escaped, and a misshapen stump of a hand appeared. Some sort of torso or framework emerged from the depth, dripping with water, covered with mold and a cadaverous putridity -- maybe a man, beast, or plant. The monstrosity glinted his amazed face toward the sky, opened spongy lips wide in a vague imbecilic-enigmatic smile,

extracted from the vat legs twisted as a thicket of coral, and, shaking himself of water, started to walk with an unsteady, swinging step...

Already it was daybreak; violet luminosities slithered about the boundless regions of the world.

The freak was heading toward the deep-blue forest on the distant horizon. He parted the wicket in the garden beyond the house, shifted himself bowleggedly along a narrow path, and, drenched in the amethystine streams of morning twilight, tottered toward fields and meadows slumbering in daybreak's obscurity. Slowly, his figure diminished, became diluted, started to expire... until it dissolved, dispersing in the gleams of early dawn...

The Return of Noire

Michael Bullock

Michael Bullock has been translated into Japanese, Chinese, French, German, Polish... Anais Nin called his work "exactly what I wish for: a liberating expansion of what is reality." He founded the poetry magazine Oasis, *has been associate editor of* Prism international, *board member of* Canadian Fiction, *and contributes to the major literary journals in Canada and worldwide. Sono Nis and Melmoth/Third Eye are his present publishers, issuing such unusual collections as* Randolph Cranstone and the Pursuing River, Green Beginning Black Ending, The Man With Flowers Through His Hands, *and* Prisoner of the Rain. *The present ghost story was in his first collection* Sixteen Stories as They Happened *and recently in the complete Noire tales,* The Story of Noire.

Last time I saw Noire she was lying dead in Tokyo, yet there she was now sitting in a deck chair in Hyde Park, London.

Somewhat surprised I went up to her and said, "Hullo, Noire, is that you?"

"Hullo," she said. "Of course, who else could it be?"

"Well, no one I suppose," I said, "but last time I saw you, you were in Tokyo."

"So were you."

"Yes, true, but then I can still get around and I didn't think you could."

"On the contrary. I'm not limited by time and space the way you are. I've been through the door, as you know, and now I can go anywhere."

I looked at her open-mouthed for a second, and then found myself gazing at an empty chair. I drew up another chair and sat down in it beside the one Noire had been occupying; then I pulled out my sandwiches and began to eat my lunch -- the reason I had come into the park in the first place.

As I chewed away at my black bread and salami I gazed around at the trees and the people, but especially at the trees, because they were greener than I remembered them.

"Well," said Noire, who was now sitting beside me again, "what have you been doing since I last saw you?"

"I've been teaching Creative Writing in an American university. I sold a couple of stories about you to an international magazine the university published, so they asked me to come over and help teach the students how to write."

"Were they good stories?"

"I don't know whether they were good. They were true."

"What are you doing now?"

"Well, actually I'm here to see my publisher, but I'm about to go away again and do the same sort of thing in Canada. But I'm in some trouble. Since you died I can't write any more stories. They don't happen to me."

"Oh, that's terrible. What can we do about it? How can I help you?"

"I don't know if you can help me. I mean, now you've been through the door. Will it be the same? For instance, there were things we used to do together that meant a lot to me -- it was like putting my roots in the earth and drawing up the water; but now -- all of a sudden there may be no one between me and the mattress!"

"Yes, that could happen. I don't come and go entirely as I please."

I shook my head despondently, gazing down at the grass. By the time I looked up the chair beside me was empty again.

I took a slip of paper from my pocket and wrote this down. I skimmed through what I had written and thought to myself: "Perhaps I stand a chance." Noire still existed, that was one point in my favor; but her existence existed on such a plane of uncertainty that I was unsure how much I could rely on it as a foundation upon which to write.

I was due to leave for Vancouver next day -- should I go?

Obviously, the laws of geography did not bound Noire's existence, but what did determine it? Was she destined to continue to be in places where she had previously been, or did my presence play some part in determining her being? I thought about it deeply and came to the conclusion that the second hypothesis was the more likely -- or was this mere wishful thinking and a gross exaggeration of my creative powers? Time would tell, and in the meantime I decided to go to Vancouver; the reasons for not going seemed too tenuous and unreliable. Perhaps I could re-create Noire even in an environment totally alien to her.

As I drove to the airport I wondered when I should see her again; not on the journey to the airport, I was sure -- indeed, I hoped, because her appearance now, in present company, would have caused me some embarrassment. On the plane, perhaps? But where would she sit, since all the seats were pretty certain to be occupied?...

Indeed they were, and as we sailed along above the clouds looking out at a sun that seemed now to be sinking, now rising, the only place I could conceive of seeing her would have been perched on the wing outside -- but remembering her love of comfort, this seemed to me most unlikely and it certainly did not happen.

In any case, there was no sign of her by the time we touched down at Vancouver nor was she waiting to greet me as I came out of Customs. I called a taxi, asked advice as to a suitable hotel and had myself taken there.

The reception desk was in the hands of a lady who seemed to be of Chinese origin. After she had commented on how "extremely British" I sounded, I felt justified in enquiring whether she was a native of Vancouver or had come from outside.

"I'm from Hong Kong," she replied.

"How very interesting," said Noire, standing beside me. "That's where I come from."

There followed an interchange of reminiscences between the two women about the home from which they were both so far.

After some five minutes of this, Noire and I took the lift to my suite on the first floor. During the brief ascent I trembled with trepidation over the possible difficulties and disappointments that might lie ahead.

To my enormous satisfaction and relief, however, my fears proved absolutely groundless and I passed a night of almost supernatural delight, suggesting to me that Noire had only been teasing when she told me she was not in full control of her coming and going. When I woke in the morning I found myself once more alone, and I breakfasted alone, gazing out at the waters of English Bay sparkling in the early September sunshine.

After breakfast I strolled along the path that runs between the trees of Stanley Park on its right and the rock-covered, timber-strewn beach on its left.

After I had walked for about a quarter of an hour, I dropped down onto the beach, seated myself on a water-whitened tree trunk and gazed out across the sea, thinking to myself that I must be looking in the direction of Tokyo.

"Yes," said Noire, sitting beside me. "That's the route to the East. It's a long way, but it's a direct flight from here. You should make it when the time comes to leave -- you're almost halfway there already."

For half an hour or more we chatted in the most intimate and affectionate manner, free from all feeling of constraint. In our usual way, we discussed possible voyages and Noire revealed to me her plan to stay with her brother in Brazil. I suppressed a pang of jealousy -- or was it hurt pride at tills intimation of the independence of Noire's existence from my creative power? -- and also refrained from enquiring whether this would be a visit of

minutes, weeks, or months; but I made a mental note to investigate the possibility of stopping off at Rio de Janeiro on my way home or elsewhere.

A few days later I was taking a class in Creative Writing, when I instanced the Japanese *haiku* as the supreme example of brevity and concision hi poetry. "Quite right," called out Noire from the back row. "There's nothing to touch it in that respect." As the class was meeting for the first time, not everyone knew everyone else -- perhaps, that was why no one showed any surprise at Noire's sudden appearance from nowhere. In any case, the rest of the period passed uneventfully and without any further intervention from Noire, although she remained present -- possibly because I carefully kept the theme of Japanese poetry running through my general remarks on poetry and specific comments on the work read out by members of the class.

After the class I strolled with Noire to the Nitobe Japanese Memorial Tea Garden on campus and spent some little while wandering round it in the late afternoon sunshine. Noire confessed that she felt more at home here than anywhere else she had recently been. I noted this statement with interest -- convinced that I should find her here at any time her absence became too prolonged.

The moment we walked out through the bamboo gate, she was no longer with me.

Several times recently Noire has spent the night with me and I am glad to say that her durability in this respect leaves nothing to be desired, so that my initial anxieties have now been almost entirely allayed. On the other hand, she is always gone by the time I wake up in the morning. The one exception to this so far was the last time she stayed overnight, when she had breakfast with me and did not disappear until the last cup of coffee had been drunk and it was time to do the washing up. Could this have been connected with the fact that I had planned to eat for breakfast some of the wafer-thin, green seaweed biscuits a friend has sent from Tokyo? They have a curious flavor I am not altogether sure I like, but if they prove to be successful Noire bait they will be worth ordering regularly.

Up to now Noire's performance had impressed me only by virtue of her geographical mobility; I am beginning to feel that it is time she displayed some other exceptional powers -- otherwise her unusual situation would appear to present only limited advantages.

This afternoon I drove out to a point by the Fraser River delta, parked my car in one of the few places where parking is permitted, and embarked on a precipitous and scrambling descent down through the huge trees toward the water. As I made my way cautiously down the steep declivity, clinging to branches and bushes as I went, I attempted to identify die various trees and shrubs between which I was passing. I realized that a great many were unknown to me, and it crossed my mind that the vegetation bore a resemblance -- which may have been more apparent than real -- to that which I had seen in many Japanese films. I thought particularly of *The Burmese Harp.* As this recollection entered my mind I heard a few notes on some stringed instrument high above my head. I looked up -- and there was Noire perched in the topmost branches of a tall pine, holding a musical instrument of obviously oriental character.

I waved. Noire waved back. "Come on down," I said. "All right," she replied and came floating down, landing gently beside me on the steep path.

"I'm trying to get down to the shore," I told her, "so I can walk along the banks of the Fraser River delta and look at the log booms floating out on the deep water."

"You'll find it difficult," she said. "You'll find that the foreshore along the delta is nothing but wet mud covered in twigs and you'll keep sinking in."

"Oh, well," I said, "let's have a try."

We scrambled on down and finally, after clambering over a huge fallen tree; we jumped down onto the foreshore.

I thrust a stick into the ground opposite the point at which the path ended, so that we should find it on our way back, and we set off to the left along the delta. But after only some twenty yards or so I had to admit that Noire had been right and that it was virtually impossible for me to walk on this soaking wet soil. We therefore turned back and walked along the sandy beach in the direction of English Bay and, ultimately, the open sea.

On our left lay the vast log booms looking simultaneously peaceful and menacing, like huge landing craft lying temporarily at anchor. The beach itself, with the seawater lapping restlessly against it, was a fantastic jumble of boulders, enormous logs that had broken loose from the booms and become stranded, and gigantic trees that had fallen from the bank and lay in attitudes of contorted abandon, sometimes clutching large rocks in the embrace of their twisted roots. In some instances trees with their roots still in the soil had fallen forward and were leaning out over the water, so that it was possible to climb out along them and gaze down into the salty depths. The whole place appeared to my unaccustomed eye almost unearthly -- like the now proverbial landscape of the moon.

We walked on along the foreshore for perhaps an hour, clambering over or crawling under trees and tree roots most of the time, occasionally stopping to sit on a rock or a tree trunk and rest and gaze out along the sparkling pathway made by the sun, now quite low in the sky, on the rippling sea.

Feeling that it was time to head back for the car, but not wanting to retrace our steps, I kept an eye on the steep wooded bank to our right in search of an alternative path. Eventually I saw a small stream emerging from along the tall trees and thick bushes.

I suggested to Noire that we should try to use this for our ascent and she agreed.

I scrambled up first to explore the possibilities, only to *took* up and see Noire some yards ahead of me gliding over the steep, uneven ground like a hovercraft over a calm sea.

As I puffed and panted my way up, frequently scratching myself on the salmonberry canes that grew in some profusion alongside the stream, I felt a

certain resentful envy of Noire's effortless powers of locomotion. Nevertheless I, too, eventually reached the top after what seemed like at least a quarter of an hour's climb, and the two of us walked out through the bushes and onto the road.

We set off to the right to walk to my parked car, myself still panting for breath and with aching legs, Noire as fresh as though she had merely stepped up out of a roadway onto a curb.

I was looking forward to sitting down in the car and resting my indeed very weary legs, but it was a long walk. When we finally reached the car I put my hand in my pocket for the key -- but no key. With a sensation of horror I realized that 1 had locked the door from the outside, without withdrawing the key from the ignition. There it was, looking completely innocent and yet at this moment the object of my bitterest hatred. In my rage and frustration I felt a violent impulse to leap onto the hood and kick in the window -- when Noire opened the door from inside and said sweetly: "Anything wrong?"

"No, no," I replied airily, "no, everything's fine." We drove off in the direction of Chancellor Boulevard and home, but as we passed the Japanese Memorial Tea Garden Noire was no longer with me. I felt that without a doubt I should find her in the garden and debated with myself whether to stop the car and join her. But I was hot and sweaty and tired and evening was beginning to fall with a consequent drop in the temperature. If I were to sit or saunter about in the Japanese Garden I should stand a very good chance of catching a cold, I thought. No, it would be much more sensible to go straight home, have a hot bath, and then write up this account-of the latest incident in the story of Noire in Vancouver -- which I have done.

This story could -- I hope will -- go on indefinitely. For me it is a constant source of delightful surprises; for the reader, however, I fear that it may become monotonous, since I consider it unlikely that any events which are basically new in kind will occur, at least so long as I remain in Vancouver. I have now established certain essential facts concerning Noire's abilities! I have a rough idea of the sorts of factors that cause her appearance, I have assured myself of her nocturnal durability, and I have ascertained that even

when materialized she is not subject to the laws of gravity. With this fundamental knowledge I feel that I can look forward to a delightful few months and possibly years.

At this point, therefore, I shall ask the reader to withdraw and leave me to the undisturbed enjoyment of the situation that I have outlined. Should any development of striking interest take place, he/she may rest assured that I shall not leave him/her ignorant of it for long.

How wrong I was. My optimistic prognostications have proved sadly mistaken. It began soon after I moved into my new apartment on the top floor of a high-rise block overlooking English Bay.

Noire ceased to appear anywhere but in the apartment, and then she behaved very strangely, walking from room to room with her nostrils quivering like a hound that has lost the scent. In between she_ spoke very little and kept looking at me as though asking me a question that never crossed her lips.

Then last night the blow finally fell. For the first time in a fortnight or so Noire came out of the apartment with me and I took her to supper at a restaurant in Chinatown. It was just like old times, so damn nostalgic that halfway through the meal we actually wept.

Afterward we drove back to the apartment. As we were making our way home it occurred to me that this was one of Noire's very longest manifestations. I hoped to God she was going to stay together for at least another hour or so.

When we entered the apartment Noire, who till then -- following our joint attack of nostalgia in the restaurant -- had been really most affectionate, suddenly changed. Once again she began to prowl about from room to room with her nostrils quivering. Finally she opened the door of the built-in cupboard in the entrance hall, reached up to the top shelf and took down -- *a* black lace mantilla left behind by another visitor. She held it to her nose,

smelt the perfume it exhaled, replaced it on the shelf, gave me a deep and penetrating look -- and vanished.

This morning, after a restless night, I went for a walk in the sunshine along the beach. I thought I heard whispering behind me and looked over my shoulder, but there was no one there, or at least no one who could possibly have been whispering to me. This happened several times, until it occurred to me that it was the sea that was whispering. It was high tide and the water was washing up against the wall at the side of the path and flowing to and fro over logs and boulders.

Although I couldn't clearly distinguish what it was saying, it sounded to me like an accusation. I cursed the sea for its incessant nagging, but it continued unabated. Then, in my anger, I spat into it twice, but this made no difference either.

I therefore turned off from the seafront and plunged in among the huge trees, patches of marsh and streams of Stanley Park. As I walked along the trails, crossing bars of shadow and sunlight, I could still hear a soft, accusing whispering behind me, accompanied by the sound of very quiet footfalls, as though someone almost weightless whose feet barely touched the ground was following me. But there was never anyone there when I looked around.

I walked on for an hour or more, enjoying the beauties of the forest, but constantly perturbed by the sense of being accusingly followed.

Finally I could stand it no longer, looked for a trail leading back to the beach and home and strode along it as fast as I could, still pursued by almost silent footsteps.

Now, as I sit writing this down, my hair is standing on end at the back of my neck, upon which I can feel the gentle breath of someone I cannot see, who is leaning over my shoulder reading every word I set down on the paper.

I believe that I shall never see Noire again. Nor shall I ever be free from her watchful and accusing presence. Because I shall never make the sacrifice

she demands: I shall never destroy the black lace mantilla.

A Light from Out of Our Heart

Jules Faye

> *It is the shared delusion of editors that we "discover" authors, and I like to think of myself as having discovered, in the present volume alone, Archie N. Roy, Carol Reid, and Jules Faye. The discovery of Jules Faye is an unusual case in that I quickly fell in love with her, seduced by the erotic, morbid, violent prose-poems she gave to me. (Some of these daring pieces have since appeared in* Fantasy & Terror..) *So far she has contributed two stories to* Fantasy Macabre: *"The Cafe of the Beautiful Assassins" and the following item, her first, which is 99 percent unexaggerated autobiography. "The Promenade of Misshapen Animals" is another recently completed story. They're all as perverse and gorgeous as the titles suggest.*

It is the blackness of the night, the slow descent of spreading darkness, which stirs restlessness in my heart. Night's constant prowling casts poisoned shadows across the surface of my most beloved dreams and memories, enticing the demons in my mind to rise. For blackness is not an absence of light, it is a presence of its own, more sinister because it cannot be grasped and held against one's longing breast. Oh, I am so weary of the beasts who visit only in the midnight of my solitude. When the world sleeps I am most fiercely alone.

And at these times I cannot sleep, for Death comes crawling into my bed late, late at night and lays His cold sweat across my naked body. I must fly; I cannot bear the icy marks He leaves across my neck and brow. I wrap in capes, blood red across my lips and walk in tall skin boots into the city streets where yellow lamps caress the boulevards and alleyways. Perhaps this light that falls like shattered glass against my skin will slice into the darkness of my soul and some small measure of comfort can be had among the scattered darkness of the avenues.

I'm drawn into the bowels of the city night, through the sweet decay of vegetable and human piss. Angry gusts of steam snort and belch from rusted manhole covers and iron gratings sunk into the gutters at my feet and rise like little ghosts dancing on their toes, leering, gaping from disintegrating faces. They churn and roil in puffs of gurgling laughter then detach their limbs and dance around behind me disappearing, rising up, drifting into pieces. All around the air is thick with dancing arms, the echo of a face and wisps of writhing feet, swirling slowly in around my ankles, knees, and up around my thighs. And I feel mournful sighs against my cheeks and in my hair. I stumble forward, turning to get outside this ring of ghostly fingers reaching, but everywhere I turn, more wisps of steam roll up to kiss with disembodied lips. I twist again and stumble, sinking into something soft and wet, which holds my boot. And ripping through the coils of steam, I fall against the stony pavement, cutting chin against a broken bottle.

Suddenly the air is clear and crisp. No vapor demons tumble in the breeze. The city holds its breath and makes no sound as I lie wiping drops of blood from off my jaw. Light falls quietly from lamps above my head, indifferently embracing me with fragile warmth. It drifts across the street and past the curtain of its furthest reach where some furtive motion slithers. Nothing else dares move or breathe and then an eerie cry pierces the silence. The city shivers in the chill.

A thing with poison eyes slides quietly outside the edges of the light and utters some foul and wretched curse from its inhuman voice. I shudder and draw my cape more tightly around my shoulders. I back away from those demented sounds. Death follows even here, tormenting me as I flee into the arms of my beloved city. I peer into the grit and ash around my feet and bare my teeth, grimacing into the creature's piercing eyes. So it steps out into the center of the light on little grey feet, ripples its pretty tail and curls seductively against my ankles. It is only a lovely cat; mortal and alone like myself, a more propitious companion than He who awaits me in my bed. She turns her delicate whiskers, inviting towards the darker shadows of the street and I cannot resist. I follow her cat feet as she looks back, purring, whispering, "Yes, yes, come with me."

She skirts and slinks along the crumbling edges of mottled brick and shattered glass. The streetlight falls like stars into her rippling fur, catching there to draw me after her. And I begin to move in and out of light and shadow with her same liquid grace, leaping gently through dampened flocks of paper, which tumble in the breeze along the muted streets.

She leads me through a tiny alleyway, barely wide enough for me to follow, and there behind an iron gate, two steps set into a boarded window frame, sits another cat, majestically, its eyes reflect maniacal green light from passing cars. It sits enshrined by shadow like a prince and stares with great disdain at my approach. The two cats greet, my little pretty with her grey-spiked fur and this other dusted, stinking, one ear lying limp against its skull, and yet with noble dignity it spits onto the leather of my boot. Cautiously I, too, reach out in greeting, but the princely cat recedes still further into darker shadows, hissing as I pull away.

Grey Cat laughs, leaps down lightly and leads me out into another street. I chase after her past rows of broken buildings. The walls are slashed with boards and cracked and shattered windowpanes. Street lamps flicker and hiss above our heads and throw their amber light like darts against the jagged shards. Then Grey Cat turns into the broken stairway of what was once a fine Victorian apartment house.

The door is left ajar and we walk into a large room. Three tall windows face the street and silver light pours onto the wooden floor in great square patches. Newspapers hang from walls and ceiling and flutter in the draft like frightened crumpled birds. Gutted strips of cotton bedding are strewn across the floor in a frenzied labyrinth where mice run shrieking into fabric ducts and burrows. But Grey Cat is swift and flawless. She swipes an infant mouse, squealing in her teeth, and carries it lovingly to where I'm sunk against the wall. She drops it at my feet. The tiny beast lies stunned a moment only, and then scrambles to its toes and dashes right into the cat's big paw. She bats it on the nose, pinches its tiny spine in her teeth and lets it drop abruptly.

Now the mouse is paralyzed. It can no longer move its little legs and lolls at my feet, its baby eyes rolling. Grey Cat gently bites off its arm with a clean and simple beauty. She lifts it by the tail and drops it in my lap. I pick it up

and place it in my mouth like fresh strawberries. Tiny mouse bones crunch between my molars as blood and juices squirt against the back of my parched throat. Claws spasm against my tongue and my stomach heaves in cramping waves as I belch and vomit and fall laughing in my puke.

I lie a long time, cat licking at my cheek and eyes. I watch the silvered light from tall glass windows reel across the floor and slide around the corners of the wall like spinning kites against a cubic sky. As I roll over on my knees, Grey Cat slips out the door and down the stairs. I lope after her, thoroughly seduced.

As I step into the night, a breeze lifts out of the steaming gutters blowing wisps of swirling dust and pebbles in my eyes. Paper cups and wrappers cartwheel over fur and boots, catching and hiding the wan light in little folds and crevices. A fine haunting mist descends quietly. Like a velvet cape the mist unfurls in scarves around the twin peaks rising from the city's heart and rolls down into the blackened pavements of the city night. There is no color at this hour, only shades and tones and qualities of black, white, grey and as I glance at my naked hand I see it too is grey and rippling like the fur of a cat.

She darts onto a hidden, shadowed stairs, which crumbles up between tall buildings into perfect blackness. I follow blind on hands and knees into the unlit passage, ripping flesh against the sharpened points of rusted nails and broken glass. I pause to suck my bleeding palms but she skips lightly up and up and I leap after her until the blue-black sky kisses our chins and we step out onto the rooftops far above the city streets.

We sit, cat and I, against a tall wooden box and listen to the groaning, cursing night. Great moans and sighs and hissing issue from the yards and alleyways across the sleeping districts like a monstrous beast crying in its dreams, calling out to a more monstrous god. And rising over the jagged toothy edge of shimmering city lights comes the pale, cold moon, licking lazily at the beads of mist curling down the darkened alleyways. Grey Cat walks prettily along the raised ledge of the flat roof, peering down into the rolling fog. She pauses, silhouetted by the rising moon, haloed by the rising mist. She yawns like an angel. And I watch the moon disappear between her angel teeth and see the moonlight fall on me from pointed angel eyes.

Then the box behind me shudders and I hear scrambling, scratching, plucking, and I see feathers at my feet the color of the moon. Grey Cat leaps through a tear in the frail wire above my head and wild flapping and screaming fill my ears. Cat flies out covered in pigeon blood and laughing crazy like a cat, torn wings and severed feet swinging from her jaw. And down the crumbling stairs we fly, back out onto the city street, tripping, chasing, sailing in and out of doors and passages, crossing empty streets and boarded alleys with wind and chilling mist catching in our hair and eyes.

Everything is blurred and muted flight. No light penetrates the fog. No street or house stands out from any other. Only the stony surface of the street throws points of light like shattered glass into our faces. And in this way I follow her across the city night, through angry, sleeping streets until I smell the sea and all streets come to their beginning.

Abandoned railway tracks slash across this part of town, curve past rows of little deckhouses and disappear mysteriously behind huge bolted warehouse doors. Tufts of golden weeds thrust their thistled faces through the cracks along the sidewalks and between the railroad tracks, reaching for our feet to trick and tease the ankles. Weeded vacant lots piled with rubbish sit along the dock's edge. Cat leaps into brimming mounds of fat, the molding heads and skins and delicate bones of fish and crab, hardened crusts and rinds of bread and fruit. The smell of rot dances over the street like moonlight on a waterfall. And I plunge my hungry hands into the sweetened stench to feast with cat.

And now the barest light begins slowly to fall against the glass facades, the scattering dust, and the water in the bay. The mist takes on a pearly hue. From the weeds I hear a most pathetic crackling rise. I drop the rubbish from my fist and peer intently into flags of paper caught on weeds and blowing in the wind. And there in the exact center stands the most bedraggled rooster, hunched and ruffled, no feathers left round his wrinkled neck, one foot a stump and both wings clipped. With a sweet integrity he lifts his beak and pours his wretched music up into the dawning sky. And at my side Grey Cat calls back. Then I hear another cattish cry from down the street, and then a howling dog. Soon, from every street and alleyway, the

songs of cat and dog and one lone cock rise up, converging in a symphony against the water's edge of this most magnificent city as the eastern sky purples into sunrise. And in this way the sun is pulled from her long sleep and I, beast among beasts, cry out in my most inhuman voice. For without the bark and cackling howl of every beast at dawning light, the sun would never rise again and narcissistic humanity would perish.

Mr. Templeton's Toyshop

Thomas Wiloch

Thomas Wiloch's Grimoire *lasted six issues, offering "nihilistic pablum for a mediocre society." Despite its short life it made an impact and won't soon be forgotten. His own prose miniatures have graced the Ace Books anthology* Elsewhere *(World Fantasy Award winner) and many small journals of surrealism and horror. His collection* Stigmata Junction *(prose poems and collages) was issued by Stride in Cheshire, England, with a second collection pending. Portions of "Mr. Templeton's Toyshop" appeared in* All the Devils are Here *edited by David Deyo, Jr., a landmark anthology from the Unnamable Press folks, who started out as a letterpress publisher of macabre poetry.*

The Porcelain Doll

Mr. Templeton's toyshop is quite unique. He has glass animals, lead soldiers, and wooden ships. There are paper kites, crystal rings, marbles, and music boxes. And high on a shelf is the beautiful Alice, a porcelain doll so dainty and lifelike as to rival even the little girls in the village. The old woman buys Alice. "It will be a gift for my granddaughter," she explains. "I'm sure she will enjoy it," Mr. Templeton says politely. He carefully wraps the doll and takes the money she hands him. It is late and he is closing shop and she is the last to leave. They say goodnight and Mr. Templeton closes the door behind her. As she walks home in the darkness, the woman fancies a movement in the package she carries. There seems to be a wriggling. She is surprised when a tiny hand pokes out of the paper. She is even more surprised when the hand pushes a little knife into her throat. She can only gurgle incoherently as she falls. Later, we see Mr. Templeton in his toyshop

window. His eyes are gleaming with expectation. Soon he spies his little Alice strutting down the moonlit street, a bloodstained pocketbook in one hand, and a gleaming knife in the other.

The Kaleidoscope

Mr. Templeton holds the kaleidoscope to the young boy's eye. "Look in here," he says. The boy peeks inside the little cardboard tube while Mr. Templeton twists the other end. "See the colors?" Mr. Templeton says. "Oh, yes," says the boy. "What pretty patterns it makes!" Mr. Templeton smiles. Then he twists the kaleidoscope the other way. The boy's mouth opens wide, he inhales, and then he screams. "There we are," says Mr. Templeton, pulling the kaleidoscope from the child's bloody socket. "Now let's get the other eye." Later, a woman comes to the toyshop to buy a stuffed bear for her nephew. "That one is perfect," she says, pointing out a particular bear. "It has the prettiest blue eyes, just like my little nephew Randy." Mr. Templeton raises his eyebrows, a ' trifle surprised. "I believe I've met your Randy," he tells her.

The Music Box

He buys a music box at Mr. Templeton's toyshop. It is carved of dark oak and has hinges of brass. "It will play the Salzbach waltz," says Mr. Templeton, "when I set the mechanism." He is sure she will like it. "Please deliver it today," he says, and Mr. Templeton nods sagely. Later, she opens the package the deliveryman has brought. "A music box," she cries. It is so very beautiful. She reads the card he has enclosed and she smiles. How sweet. Wanting to hear the song the box plays, she lifts the lid. A melody begins. A soft and lilting melody. She finds herself dancing. It is a most

compelling tune. That night he stops by to see how she likes his gift. He knocks on the door. He knocks again. He opens the door and enters her room. She is crumpled on the floor, gasping and holding her heart. Her feet kick back and forth, scraping the wooden floor in time with the tinkling melody. "My dear!" he cries, rushing forward. But he cannot reach her. He cannot bend down to help her. Instead, he finds himself dancing...

The Toy Boat

Mr. Templeton hands the toy boat to the boy at the counter. Its white sails glow in the darkness of the musty toyshop and its single red running light shines like a malignant eye. The boy gapes at this treasure, which, after long weeks of saving, is finally his alone. "Enjoy your boat!" says Mr. Templeton as the boy leaves the shop. "I will!" the boy calls back. "Right away!" Mr. Templeton smiles. The boy gathers some friends together and, amid a flurry of excited voices, the children hurry to the river. There, the boy places his boat into the water and, majestically, it drifts away. The children jump and shout and run along the shore, following the craft. Suddenly, a change comes over the boat. The white sails swell, the wooden frame widens, and the masts sprout from twig size to poles. The boat is growing. And presently there is a sailing ship before their startled, delighted eyes. The ship comes to a halt. A gangplank is lowered. The children scramble aboard. They have never been on a ship before. Some climb the rigging, others examine the cannon, and still others spin the great wheel that steers the ship. Behind them the gangplank is quietly hoisted. Then, magically, the ship seems to vibrate. It grows less clear; its image blurred and smaller. In a moment it is gone. There is only empty space. Space, and a small toy boat bumping against the rocks of the shore. We see Mr. Templeton approach and pluck the boat from the water. Later, in the silence of his dark study, Mr. Templeton sits at his desk. The toy boat has been placed before him while he holds one of the children in a pair of tweezers. With his free hand, he carefully pulls at the child's tiny fingers. The child raises quite a fuss as, one

by one, Mr. Templeton removes the fingers and places them in a neat row upon a sheet of white paper. The noise is really more than Mr.

Templeton can stand. Why must children be so loud? This was to be, he had hoped, a quiet evening of scientific study. He puts an end to the child's complaints with a well-placed pin.

The Figurines

The figurines on the glass shelf are delicately fashioned. "Even the eyelashes are perfect," the woman says. Mr. Templeton smiles proudly. "However do you carve them so?" she asks, examining a little man dressed in a business suit. She unbuttons the man's coat and a tiny label displays the manufacturer's name. "These figures are not carved," Mr. Templeton explains. "Come here, I'll show you." He leads her into the back of the store. Lifting a cloth, he reveals a metal birdcage. Inside the cage is a crowd of tiny people, each three inches tall. "A simple hypodermic injection," Mr. Templeton says. "I do a bit of experimenting as a hobby." He opens a trapdoor on the top of the cage and, reaching in with a pair of tongs, he lifts out a small woman. The woman kicks her legs and swings her arms and the sounds she makes are like squeaky shoes. "I will show you how it is done," Mr. Templeton says. He places the small woman in a glass jar, and then he sprays a mist at her from a squeeze bottle. The woman coughs, twitches, and then is stiff. She stands impossibly still, staring. Mrs. Templeton picks her up and hands her to his customer. "Here you are," he says. "Isn't it lovely?" The woman gasps and drops the figurine on the floor. It shatters like a teacup. "Oh my," says Mr. Templeton. "A most unfortunate accident. I'm afraid you will have to replace that for me." The nervous woman reaches into her purse. "Oh no," says Mr. Templeton, grabbing the woman's arm and poking her-with a hypodermic, "that is not what I meant at all."

The Magnifying Glass

The shelf of magnifying glasses has attracted the man's attention. "I'm looking for a toy for my son. Something mentally stimulating," he says. "Try this one," says Mr.

Templeton, handing him a large magnifying glass with a black handle. "Go stand by the window so you get the best light." The man walks to the window and peers through the magnifying glass, examining his hand. "This is a good lens," he tells Mr. Templeton. "I can see the pores of my hand perfectly." "That's an amazing lens," Mr. Templeton agrees. The man shifts the glass to investigate the pattern on his tie, but there is something abnormal. The hand he has just been looking at has changed. It has enlarged and grown warped, as if the distortion of the magnifying glass has taken hold and set. "Oh my god," says the man. His torso feels odd. He has been holding the lens to his tie and now his chest, too, has expanded strangely. As he frantically drops the magnifying glass, it slides against his leg, distorting it so that the misshapen limb can no longer support him. He falls. "What's going on?" the man says to Mr. Templeton, who comes around the counter and carefully picks up the magnifying glass. 'I have been doing some experiments with this glass," Mr. Templeton explains. "It only does this in sunlight." He stoops over the frightened man and holds the lens to his panicked face. "Now," says Mr. Templeton, "let's see what this glass can really do."

The Slide Projector

Mr. Templeton shows the new slide projector his toyshop is selling. "It comes with this box of pretty slides," he explains. The man nods his head. "Is it reliable?" he asks Mr. Templeton. "I don't want it to break right away. My Gloria would be so brokenhearted." "It's very dependable," says Mr.

Templeton. "No one has ever complained to me about it." That satisfies the man. Later, a little girl sits on the rug while her father sets up the projector. "We will show the pictures on this wall, Gloria," he says. The little girl claps her hands and laughs. "You shouldn't have spent so much," his wife reproaches him quietly. He waves a hand. "She'll like it," he says. "And it wasn't that much." His wife shuts off the lamp and the projector lights the wall. He clicks a switch and a slide moves into place. A picture of a lion. "Oh, look at that, dear," says the woman. Gloria giggles and points. The picture wobbles. "Must be something wrong with the slide," the man says, squinting inside the projector. The picture wobbles again. Then the lion blinks his eyes, paws at the ground, and roars. "Is this a moving picture?" his wife asks. He is about to say no when the lion leaps off the wall and quiets him forever with a swipe of his huge paw. The man's face gleams in bright red lines for a moment before he falls, knocking over the projector and plunging the room into chaotic darkness. Later that night we see Mr. Templeton walking through the dim light towards his shop, carrying a projector under his arm and leading a large animal on a rope. "And how was little Gloria?" he asks the animal as they stroll along.

The Tea Set

"Look what I bought you at Mr. Templeton's," he says. The little girl opens the box and then gives a squeal of delight. "A tea set!" she says. "Oh, thank you, daddy!" He smiles at her. "Now you go play with that, dear, but be careful you don't break anything." She hurries off to her room. Soon there is a little party going on. A teddy bear and a doll sit solemnly at a table with plates and teacups before them. "Drink up," she tells her guests, pouring out water from the teapot. "This is good tea." She holds a teacup to the teddy bear's lips and then to the doll's lips, too. "There, wasn't that good?" she says. Then she takes a sip of the water from her own teacup. Later, her father enters the room. The teddy bear and doll sit quietly, their arms and legs at stiff angles. "Having fun?" he asks. The girl does not reply. She sits staring at her two companions. "Dear?" he says, walking over to her.

"What's wrong?" Her face is a smooth mask, shiny as the china teacup she holds in her hand. Her eyes are white and vacant, looking at the air. He reaches for her hand. It is stiff and glasslike. With a snap, it falls off. There is a tinkling sound as it hits the floor and shatters into a sprinkling of white fragments. Then there is the sound a man makes when he is trying to destroy the world with a single, wailing scream.

The Aquarium

"It is time to feed the fish," Mr. Templeton says to the group of children who have come into his toyshop. "Would you like to watch?" "Yes," they all say, and so Mr. Templeton leads the children to a corner of his shop where the lights of an aquarium twinkle in the shadows. The children gather round the glass tank and whisper among themselves about the strange bulgy-eyed fish that bump against each other in the crowded water, the streams of bubbles released by shiny silver tubes, and the landscape of colored stones and green plants at the bottom of the aquarium. Mr. Templeton brings out a cardboard box from which he takes a piece of dried grayish material rather surprisingly shaped like a human hand. He reaches over the edge of the aquarium and drops it in the water. Instantly the fish dart for the food and, in a frenzy of bubbles and foam, which makes the children ooh and aah, they eat the meat. After a moment the water clears and the food is gone. "Gosh, Mr. Templeton," says one little boy. "Can I help you feed the fish?" "Tomorrow," says Mr. Templeton, smiling. "Come here tomorrow and you can feed the fish." The next day, the boy arrives at the toyshop in the late afternoon. "There you are," says Mr. Templeton. "Those fish are hungry, so let's get to work." They go to the aquarium in the back of the store and Mr. Templeton arranges a short wooden stepladder for the boy to stand on. "Is this how you do it?" the boy says, leaning over the tank with the food Mr. Templeton has given him. "A little farther," says Mr. Templeton. "Here, I'll help you." He holds the boy by the waist, lifts him, and tips him over into the water headfirst. There is a moment of bubbling noise as the boy, his face lit by the light of the aquarium, struggles to speak under water. Then the

fish turn and dart and his face is no longer seen. Carefully, Mr. Templeton lowers the boy into the furiously thrashing water until, after much splashing and noise, the boy is in. After a time the tank water grows calm, the frothing ebbs away, and the fish swim as languidly as they did before in the silent, strangely lit water. It was a week later when a nervous woman came to the toyshop to speak with Mr. Templeton. "It's about my little boy," she says.

"He has been missing for several days and I don't know what to do. I've heard from the children that he was supposed to be working for you a few days ago. Do you know where he might have gone?" "Your boy fed my fish," says Mr. Templeton, motioning to the aquarium, "and that's the last I've seen of him."

The Halloween Candy

Halloween is Mr. Templeton's favorite holiday. He stands in the doorway of his little toyshop and gives candy to the neighborhood children who come begging. One little girl is dressed as a bear. "Is that what you really want to be?" asks Mr. Templeton. "Grrrr!" the little girl says through the hole in her mask. Mr. Templeton chuckles and hands her a piece of candy. Other children come, display their gaudy costumes, and take the candy Mr. Templeton offers. "Is that what you really want to be?" he asks each child in turn. "Oh yes," say the werewolf, the snake, and the gorilla. "Oh yes," say the dinosaur, the vampire, and the crocodile. And to each of the children Mr. Templeton gives his candy. Late that night, Mr. Templeton is awakened by screams. He opens his bedroom shutter and looks down into the narrow street below. Small, colorful figures are roaming in the dim light, some snarling, others hissing or howling. Two of the figures pull open the door of a house down the way and all of them clamber inside. A few moments later there are more screams. Screams cut short. And then the strange little creatures bustle out into the street again, licking some sort of dark liquid from their faces and hands. "Mr. Templeton!" a voice calls from down below. He leans out and sees a woman at his toyshop door. "Mr. Templeton,

please let me in! Please!" From up the street the bothersome creatures are drawing closer. The woman pounds on the specially reinforced metal doors, which guard the toyshop. "I open in the morning," Mr. Templeton calls down to her. "Come back then." He secures the shutters, muffling the last of the woman's hysterical pleas. Later, there are still more screams outside. Then the padding of many little feet on the cobblestones, drifting away, finally, into the night.

The Devil Frolics with a Butler

Daniel Defoe

Daniel Defoe (1659-1731), author of Moll Randers *and* Robinson Crusoe, *stands among the Western world's greatest authors. He was also an inveterate pamphleteer in the days of the chapmen who, akin to America's "Yankee pedlars," traipsed to the far corners of England with their goods upon their backs. Defoe's best-known short story, of enormous influence on ghost stories to come after, was "The Apparition of Mrs. Veal," an anthology standard that appeared originally as a wee pamphlet. Far less well known and of like origin is "The Devil Frolics with a Butler," evidence that the small press has been important right from weird literature's beginnings.*

A gentleman in Ireland, near to the Earl of Orrery's house, sending his butler one afternoon to a neighboring village to buy cards, as he passed a field, espied a company in the middle thereof, sitting round a table, with several dishes of good cheer before them. And moving towards them, they all rose and saluted him, desiring him to sit down and take part with them. But one of them whispered these words in his ear, "Do nothing this company invites you to." Whereupon, he refusing to accept of their kindness, the table and all the dainties it was furnished with immediately vanished, but the company fell to dancing and playing upon divers musical instruments.

The butler was a second time solicited to partake of their diversions, but would not be prevailed upon to engage himself with them. Upon which they left off their merrymaking and fell to work, still pressing the butler to make one among them, but to no purpose. So that, upon his third refusal, they all vanished and left the butler alone, who in a great consternation returned home without the cards, fell into a fit as he entered the house, but soon recovering his senses, related to his master all that had passed.

The following night, one of the ghostly company came to his bedside and told him that if he offered to stir out the next day, he would be carried away. Upon this advice, he kept within till towards the evening, and, having occasion to make water, ventured to set one foot over the threshold of the door in order to ease himself, which he had no sooner done but a rope was cast about his middle, in the sight of several standers-by, and the poor man was hurried from the porch with unaccountable swiftness, followed by many persons.

But they were not nimble enough to overtake him, till a horseman, well mounted, happening to meet him upon the road, and seeing many followers in pursuit of a man hurried along in a rope without anybody to force him, caught hold of the cord and stopped him in his careen but received, for his pains, such a strap upon his back with one end of the rope as almost felled him from his horse. However, being a good Christian, he was too strong for the devil, and recovered the butler out of the spirit's clutches, and brought him back to his friends.

The Lord Orrery, hearing of these strange passages, for his further satisfaction of the truth thereof, sent for the butler, with leave of his master, to come and continue some days and nights at his house, which, in obedience to his lordship, the servant did accordingly. Who after his first night's bedding there, reported to the earl in the morning that his specter had again been with him and assured him that on that very day he should be spirited away, in spite of all the measures that could possibly be taken to prevent it. Upon which he was conducted into a large room, with a considerable number of holy persons to defend him from the assaults of Satan, among whom was the famous stroker of bewitched persons, Mr. Greatrix, who lived in the neighborhood, and knew, as may be presumed, how to deal with the devil as well as anybody. Besides, several eminent qualities were present in the house, among the rest, two bishops, all waiting the wonderful event of this unaccountable prodigy.

Till part of the afternoon was spent, the time slid away in nothing but peace and quietness, but at length the enchanted patient was perceived to rise from the floor without any visible assistance, whereupon Mr. Greatrix and another lusty man clapped their arms over his shoulders and endeavored to

weigh him down with then- utmost strength, but to no purpose. For the devil proved too powerful and, after a hard struggle on both sides, made them quit their hold; and snatching the butler from them, carried him over their heads and tossed him in the air, to and fro like a dog in a blanket, several of the company running under the poor wretch to save him from the ground. By which means, when the spirits' frolic was over, they could not find that in all this hurry scurry the frighted butler had received the least damage, but was left in status quo upon the same premises, to prove the devil a liar.

The goblins, for this bout, having given over their pastime and left their May-game to take a little repose, that he might in some measure be refreshed against their next sally, my lord ordered the same night two of his servants to lie with him, for fear some devil or other should come and catch him napping. Notwithstanding which, the butler told his lordship the next morning that the spirit had again been with him in the likeness of a quack doctor, and held in his right hand a wooden dish full of grey liquor, like a mess of porridge, at the sight of which he endeavored to awake his bedfellows.

But the specter told him his attempts were fruitless, for that his companions were enchanted into a deep sleep, advising him not to be frighted, for he came as friend and was the same spirit that cautioned him in the field against complying with the company he there met, when he was going for the cards; adding that if he had not refused to come into their measures he had been forever miserable; also wondered he had escaped the day before, because he knew there was so powerful a combination against him; that for the future there would be no more attempts of the like nature; further telling the poor trembling butler that he knew he was sadly troubled with two sorts of fits; and therefore as a friend he had brought him a medicine that would cure him of both, beseeching him to take it.

But the poor patient, who had been scurvily used by these sort of doctors, and fearing the devil might be at the bottom of the cup, would not be prevailed upon to swallow the dose, which made the spirit angry; who told him, however, he had a kindness for him, and that if he would bruise the roots of plantain without the leaves and drink the juice thereof, it should

certainly cure him of one sort of his fits; but as a punishment for his obstinacy in refusing the liquor, he should carry the other with him to his grave.

Then the spiritual doctor asked his patient if he knew him. The butler answered no. "I am," says he, "the wandering ghost of your old acquaintance John Hobby, who has been dead and buried these seven years; and ever since, for the wickedness of my life, have been lifted into the company of those evil spirits you beheld in the fields, am hurried up and down in this restless condition, and doomed to continue in the same wretched state till the day of judgment" -- adding that "had you served your Creator in the days of your youth, and offered up your prayers that morning before you were sent for the cards, you had not been treated by the spirits that tormented you with so much rigor and severity."

After the butler had reported these marvelous passages to my lord and his family, the two bishops that were present, among other quality, were thereupon consulted, whether or no it was proper for the butler to follow the spirit's advice in taking the plantain juice for the cure of his fits, and whether he had done well or ill in refusing the liquid dose which the specter would have given him. The question at first seemed to be a kind of moot point, but after some struggle in the debate, their resolution was that the butler had acted through the whole affair like a good Christian, for that it was highly sinful to follow the devil's advice in anything, and that no man should do evil that good might come of it.

So that, in short, the poor butler after his fatigue had no amends for his trouble, but was denied, by the bishops, the seeming benefit that the spirit intended him.

The Cats of Ulthar

H. P. Lovecraft

One more overwhelmingly significant author who began in the small presses, and never lost interest in them, is Howard Phillips Lovecraft. He was a contributor to The Fantasy Fan, The Vagrant, *and numerous journals of maximum rarity today. He continues to impact the small presses right up to the present time, entire magazines being devoted to the study of his life and writings, and imitations of his stories being especially popular among small press writers of every level of competence -- from deservedly unknown beginners to such giants as Ramsey Campbell and Brian Lumley.*

"The Cats of Ulthar" is a mere sampling of Lovecraft's small press writings. It first appeared in the amateur magazine The Tryout *in 1920 and was reissued in 1935 by small pressman K. H. Barlow in an edition of forty-two copies. In 1939 it was included in what has to be specialty presses' most significant volume ever,* The Outsider and Others, *the first book from August Derleth's Arkham House.*

It is said that in Ulthar, which lies beyond the river Skai, no man may kill a cat; and this I can verily believe as I gaze upon him who sitteth purring before the fire. For the cat is cryptic, and close to strange things which men cannot see. He is the soul of antique Aegyptus, and bearer of tales from forgotten cities in Meroe and Ophir. He is the kin of the jungle's lords, and heir to the secrets of hoary and sinister Africa. The Sphinx is his cousin, and he speaks her language; but he is more ancient than the Sphinx, and remembers that which she hath forgotten.

In Ulthar, before ever the burgesses forbade the killing of cats, there dwelt an old cotter and his wife who delighted to trap and slay the cats of their

neighbors. Why they did this I know not; save that many hate the voice of the cat in the night, and take it ill that cats should run stealthily about yards and gardens at twilight. But whatever the reason, this old man and woman took pleasure in trapping and slaying every cat which came near to their hovel; and from some of the sounds heard after dark, many villagers fancied that the manner of slaying was exceedingly peculiar. But the villagers did not discuss such things with the old man and his wife; because of the habitual expression on the withered faces of the two, and because their cottage was so small and so darkly hidden under spreading oaks at the back of a neglected yard. In truth, much as the owners of cats hated these odd folk, they feared them more; and instead of berating them as brutal assassins, merely took care that no cherished pet or mouser should stray toward the remote hovel under the dark trees. When through some unavoidable oversight a cat was missed, and sounds heard after dark, the loser would lament impotently; or console himself by thanking Fate that it was not one of his children who had thus vanished. For the people of Ulthar were simple and knew not whence it is all cats first came.

One day a caravan of strange wanderers from the South entered the narrow cobbled streets of Ulthar. Dark wanderers they were, and unlike the other roving folk who passed through the village twice every year. In the marketplace they told fortunes for silver, and bought gay beads from the merchants. What was the land of these wanderers none could tell; but it was seen that they were given to strange prayers, and that they had painted on the sides of their wagons strange figures with human bodies and the heads of cats, hawks, rams and lions. And the leader of the caravan wore a headdress with two horns and a curious disk betwixt the horns.

There was in this singular caravan a little boy with no father or mother, but only a tiny black kitten to cherish. The plague had not been kind to him, yet had left him this small furry thing to mitigate his sorrow; and when one is very young, one can find great relief in the lively antics of a black appear, and sonorous with purring content. The citizens talked with one another of the affair, and marveled not a little. Old Kranon again insisted that it was the dark folk who had taken them, since cats did not return alive from the cottage of the ancient man and his wife. But all agreed on one thing: that the refusal of all the cats to eat their portions of meat or drink their saucers

of milk was exceedingly curious. And for two whole days the sleek, lazy cats of Ulthar would touch no food, but only doze by the fire or in the sun.

It was fully a week before the villagers noticed that no lights were appearing at dusk in the windows of the cottage under the trees. Then the lean Nith remarked that no one had seen the old man or his wife since the night the cats were away. In another week the burgomaster decided to overcome his fears and call at the strangely silent dwelling as a matter of duty, though in so doing he was careful to take with him Shang the blacksmith and Thul the cutter of stone as witnesses. And when they had broken down the frail door they found only this: two cleanly picked human skeletons on the earthen floor, and a number of singular beetles crawling in the shadowy corners.

There was subsequently much talk among the burgesses of Ulthar. Zath, the coroner, disputed at length with Nith, the lean notary; and Kranon and Shang and Thul were overwhelmed with questions. Even little Atal, the innkeeper's son, was closely questioned and given a sweetmeat as reward. They talked of the old cotter and his wife, of the caravan of dark wanderers, of small Menes and his black kitten, of the prayer of Menes and of the sky during that prayer, of the doings of the cats on the night the caravan left, and of what was later found in the cottage under the dark trees in the repellent yard.

And in the end the burgesses passed that remarkable law which is told of by traders in Hatheg and discussed by travelers in Nir; namely, that in Ulthar no man may kill a cat.

Dead Dogs

Denis Tiani

Denis Tiani is a famed weird illustrator for Arkham House, Stu Schiffs Whispers, *Gerald W. Page's late great* Witchcraft & Sorcery, *and Harry O. Morris' Silver Scarab Press* (Nyctalops *magazine, etc.), which has at this moment a lovely, morbid portfolio of Denis' artwork available. Denis' prose is much rarer, appearing chiefly in* Fantasy & Terror. *The present vignette from issue five (new series) is perhaps typical of his highly atypical style.*

My eyes were open but I could not wake. The room was dark but I could see everything clearly. There was a buzzing sound I could feel. There were shadows on the walls -- moving -- becoming recognizable.

A dog was on the floor at the head of my bed. It had the look of death. It was standing next to a small opening in the wall. It was dark inside the wall.

The dog just looked at me, with the saddest eyes I have ever seen. It seemed like a nice dog. After a while it sat down and went to sleep, and so did I.

The next day I saw it again, on my way to work. And I kept seeing it wherever I went. It followed me around. I'd walk down the street, pass an alley, look in, and there it was: hiding behind some garbage cans. And every time I saw it it looked worse; rotten skin falling off, flies buzzing around it, maggots crawling over and through it. It didn't smell good, either. Everything but the eyes were decomposing.

One night I woke up, as usual, and there it was: lying on the floor at the foot of my bed, smelling up the room. It looked worse than ever; it scared me. I got mad, yelled, and threw a shoe at it. The dog got up, slowly, turned around, and limped away, into the hole in the wall.

I was sorry for what I had done. I felt sorry for the poor animal. I could hear it whimpering. I called it, but there was no response.

A week went by. It was still in there, in the wall. I could hear it dying. I crawled in to look for it.

It was dark inside the walls, and it seemed much larger than it could have been. It was like another world in there, and somewhere up ahead was a light -- or something. I crawled toward it.

The dog was curled up in a small alcove; a nest was padded with shredded newspaper. The light was coming from the dog itself. Its rotting flesh was glowing. Its eyes looked at me; yellow matter drained from the ducts. Something was behind the eyes, something so sad it was terrifying.

The dog was treating the maggots as if they were its pups. Frightened and repulsed, I turned away.

The poor old thing got up, as best it could, and followed me as I tried to make my way out, tried to get back to my room. Silently limping; dragging itself; trailing dead flesh. The maggots dropped off its decaying body as it moved, and followed after it.

I don't know what happened, but somehow I got lost in the walls. I couldn't find the opening. All the while those sad eyes followed me.

I panicked. I began clawing at the plaster.

The dog stopped to bury its bones as they fell off.

I was too tired to go on. I found a spot and went to sleep.

My sleep was infected with dreams -- dreams of the dog -- and I woke to find the animal watching me. I called it. It came forward. I patted it. The maggots in the dog's mouth licked my hand.

Then the dog showed me the way out.

After that, years passed, and I didn't see the dog again. I met a woman, fell in love, got married. We had children. The children grew up and left. My wife died. I watched them lower her into the ground, and I was left alone, and old, to die.

On my deathbed I awoke from sleep one night to find the dog next to my bed, where I had first seen it. Its eyes were gone now, and in the empty sockets maggots looked out.

I put my hand on its head; the maggots crawled up my arm. Then I lifted myself out of bed, and followed the dog into the wall.

It reminded me of an open grave.

I wanted to cry, but there was no reason to.

"W.D."

David Starkey

David Starkey has become quite well-known in the small horror magazines. His stories and poems have graced such journals as Twisted, Tales as Like as Not, The Mage, Deathrealm, Haunts, Dark Regions, The Horror Show, Ouroboros, Portents, Doppelganger, and Fantasy Macabre, to name only a few. "W.D." appeared originally in the second issue of Peggy Nadramia's Grue. Like many of his tales, it is written with startling economy but is much more complex than surface textures tell. This is his first full-fledged professional appearance, and it's a safe guess that it won't be his last. David lives in Blacksburg, Virginia.

Even before the sensation of pleasure was over, Matthew was awake, pleading with God to make it stop, make it go away.

He'd been so good. He'd thought only good thoughts. He'd done as his mother said. He hadn't talked to the idolaters -- the readers of paperback books, the moviegoers, the television-watchers. He'd kept himself free from everything they did. They thought he was weird, and strange, and gross. They taunted him and made fun of him. But he had ignored them all. He mustn't associate with them. He must do as his mother said.

But, even though he had been good, it had happened again. The spot on his bottom sheet was warm and damp. He wasn't even supposed to think about the name for it. For what had happened. But his mother had named it: "W.D.," she had said. "You've had a W.D., and I am going to beat you."

Wet Dream. He'd heard one of the idolaters at school say the words. Say the words and laugh about them. Make a joke of them.

The words that were so foul he could not even think about them without feeling consumed by pangs of unremitting guilt.

Maybe if he washed the sheet himself -- the sheet and his pajamas -- maybe he could sneak out of his room and go down to the basement to wash them. The washer was in the opposite end of the house from his mother's room. He could wash them, dry them, make his bed, go back to sleep, and everything would be all right.

She would not find out about his W.D. This time. Please, God, don't let her find out this time.

She would not take the cane with the gold serpent's head handle and beat his back until he could not breathe. Not this time, dear God, not this time.

Matthew climbed out of bed.

He made it to the basement without turning on a light. The floor hadn't creaked. He hadn't sneezed.

He clicked on the light above the washer and the dryer. He was sure it was safe to turn on just that one light. It was a hundred feet from his mother's room. The basement door was closed. Her bedroom door was closed. How could she see the little light? How could she ever know what he had done?

He lowered the bundle into the top of the machine. He eased the lid closed.

He clicked the machine on.

The he heard her running down the hallway like a charging bull -- the whole house seemed to be shaking.

He pushed the knob to shut off the machine, but it wouldn't stop. The water kept rushing in!

He heard her jerking open the basement door and scream his name: "Matthew!" she howled. "You've been *bad*, haven't you? You've been filthy, haven't you?"

And the other lights were coming on; his massive mother was charging down the steps like an angry sow.

"But I'm washing them," he pleaded. "I'm washing them. Isn't that OK? Doesn't that..."

But she was already over him, wielding the serpent-headed cane onto his back, beating him as if she wanted to crack his spine, break his ribs... "Filthy boy!" she howled. "Filthy! dirty! boy!"

"O God!" begged Matthew. "Oh, God! Make her stop! She's killing me!"

His mother was built like an obese football player. She weighted 240 pounds. She was nearly six feet tall. Her arm muscles were thick and strong.

"God!" begged Matthew. "Help me!"

"Shut up!" she barked. "How dare you speak the Lord's name after what you've done? How dare..."

And suddenly he was running across the basement and up the stairs.

"Stop!" his mother howled.

But he didn't stop. He ran like a wounded rabbit pursued by the hounds of Hell.

"Stop!" she bellowed. "Or I'll fix you so you never run from me again!"

The washer was full of water now. It began sloshing the sheet and pajamas, loosening the vileness that clung to them.

Matthew scrambled into the kitchen, his back throbbing, and his ribs hot steel bands encircling his lungs.

He grabbed the kitchen door and flung it open.

His mother reached the top of the stairs just as he bolted into the darkness of the warm September night.

Matthew and his mother lived in a brick, ranch-style house three miles outside the edger of town. Their house was on a knoll surrounded by woods. If only he could get into the woods, get into the woods and escape from her. He'd be free. He'd never come back. He'd never see her terrible puffy face again.

But she had already spotted him! God, she'd seen him. She was charging down the hill after him! And his back hurt so much. He felt as though his lungs were caving in. God! How could he run fast enough? How could he get away?

He dived frantically into the tangle of bushes at the edge of the yard. He wriggled his way in between the prickly branches of a juniper cluster and prayed she would not find him.

"Matthew!" she roared. "You come to me right now -- come to me and take your punishment -- or it'll be a lot worse when I find you -- a lot worse!"

"Please, God," he prayed. "Oh please God, deliver me from this. Deliver me from her. Please, God, don't let this happen to me. Don't let her find me -- please, God."

She was forcing her way into the bushes now -- swinging the serpent-headed cane back and forth, and then jabbing it savagely between the branches.

She was only ten feet away. He wanted to run, but oh God, how could he? He could barely breathe now. He was sure she had broken something in his back. It felt as if a piece of shattered rib was punching deep into his left lung. He could barely catch his breath.

He heard something.

Like water running through the ground beneath him.

He grimaced. The septic tank was under him. The washing machine must be going through its rinse cycle. Spilling out the evidence of his crime -- the liquid proof of his vileness.

And then she lunged deeper into the bushes and nearly stepped on him. She stood just two feet away, swinging the evil cane back and forth, jabbing it around her, jabbing it...

She hit his thigh with the tip of the cane.

"You filthy brat!" she howled, lurching down and grabbing him by his hair. "Stand up! Stand up and take you're beating!" She jerked him to his feet. And she swung the cane, swung it against his thin, quivering belly.

"God?" he begged. "Oh God, please?" And she hit him again. And again.

Blood was oozing from the corners of his mouth. His entire body was a single excruciatingly electric throb of pain and terror.

"Satan!" he yelled. "God has never helped me! Not once! You're my only hope!" he yelled as she hit him again. "Help me, Satan," he begged. "Help me!"

"Blasphemer!" she shrieked. "How dare you..."

The ground began to shake.

It sounded as though a thunderstorm was closing in, but the noise came from beneath them, from the septic tank beneath them.

His mother had stopped beating him.

The clouds suddenly rushed away from the full moon, and a harsh brightness illuminated the beast of a woman and her battered son. The juniper bushes began to wither and die, their limbs curling up like squids drying in the summer sun.

Matthew's mother started to back away from him. She dropped her cane and put her puffy hands across her mouth.

Matthew sank to his knees, his breathing easier now, and the fire fading from his lungs.

The ground above the septic tank suddenly ruptured -- it opened up like a great swollen boil that pops and begins to ooze. Matthew and his mother saw a mass of pink, writhing, quivering flesh through the wound in the earth.

And then the pinkness burst out, like maggots billowing out of a hole in a dead dog's bloated belly. They billowed out -- thousands of them -- babies -- human infants -- the transmogrified fruit of Matthew's dream -- each and every seed an avenging child -- a dark angel -- all bent on saving their sire from this loathsome woman.

One infant guides its tiny hand deep into her eye socket. Another tears away a piece of her breast. One is thrusting its head deep into the wound in her belly. She is down now, fallen under their weight as they mound above her, digging, tearing, fighting they're way in for any scrap they can get.

And when they are done, all turn at once and look toward Matthew.

He stands easily now. Breathing without pain. Inhaling the coolness of the night. He looks at the thousands of staring faces -- the infants' ranks stretch up the hill toward the house, spilling into the woods and down into the gulleys.

The wind begins to blow. The clouds hurl themselves back toward the moon, prodding it tentatively, and then enveloping it. The wind howls, each member in the army of babies shriveling and drying, shrinking and hissing. One succumbs to the force of wind, and then another, no longer babies, but pale, naked bats blown into the night like leaves from an autumn tree.

In another minute, they are gone.

"Now," says a dark, cold voice from behind Matthew. "I have done something for you. What, I wonder, can you do for me?"

"Anything you want," thinks Matthew, before even turning around.

The Drabbletails

Stephen Gresham

Steve Gresham has had a number of horror novels published by Zebra Books in the last few years, including Moon Lake, Half Moon Down, Dew Claws, Midnight Boy, *and* Skeleton Key. *His short stories, very curiously, have appeared exclusively in the small magazines, though he's better than nine-tenths of the authors whose work is snapped up regularly by the major anthologists. "Ghost Fall," published by the short-lived Unknown Press, was a haunting piece of paranoia worthy of Ramsey Campbell. "Moonforms," in* Fantasy Macabre, *is a horrific piece of Southern gothicism with Lovecraftian underpinnings. Other tales of merit appeared in* Potboiler, Bloodrake, Owlflight, Ghosts & Scholars, The Argonaut, *and a few other places. It was difficult to decide which of these to reprint, but I finally settled on "Drabbletails" because of its powerful visual sense and perfectly realized characterization. It appeared first in Crispin Burnham's* Eldritch Tales *and was reprinted in the anthology* Damnations *from one of the finest small presses, R. Alain Evens' Strange Company in Madison, Wisconsin. The author lives in Alabama.*

Every school has one: a boy like Albert Werner. *Weird.* That was the word that everyone used to describe him. Albert was a dark, sullen young man whose constant smirk seemed to signal that he knew some dreadful secret about nearly everyone at Longfellow High. Disheveled in appearance and thought, Albert would sit at the back of each class, daring to be taught, transfixed by the pages of pulp horror stories and slick-covered murder mysteries. He knew about murderers.

Nobody got through to Albert. Nobody penetrated his little shell, not even Mr. Carmody -- at least not at first. Albert was enrolled in Mr. Carmody's

Art 1 class, a potpourri of misfits ranging from three sophomore girls (affectionately referred to as "dirty legs") who had been booted out of home ec and pep club, to long-haired, frail boys who hated shop and phys ed, to incorrigibles like Albert. The other class members were nondescript. It was a sheer delight to see Carmody transform this motley group into a motivated, even eager class of participators. All but Albert. He was very suspicious of Carmody, studied him carefully.

Longfellow High, together with all of Masonville, Kansas, was pleased with Carmody, the new art instructor. In two short months, his teaching had won praise from students and colleagues alike. In fact, Albert's was the only dissonant note.

"I just don't like the guy," he told Mr. Madden, the Principal, after Carmody had sent him to the office for carving four-letter words into an art lab tabletop with a stainless steel undertaker's knife that he usually kept hidden in his locker. Mr. Madden was quick to defend Carmody, seeing him as a sensitive motivator of young men and women.

Most of the time Albert simply avoided Carmody, like a three-legged dog's hesitation at the edge of the highway. Carmody, unmarried and in his late 40's (though he seemed much younger, almost ageless), was unshaken by his inability to coax Albert into class activities. Carmody was too enamoured of the pleasant refuge that Masonville provided for him. A change from the rush of Chicago. He had moved after a mixed bag of jobs including teaching, commercial art, and most recently, psychiatric counseling. Degrees in psychology, art, and education gave him an impressive set of credentials. He not only "looked good on paper," but he was also a splendid physical specimen, with charm and grace and a touch of British accent. Most people even overlooked his puzzling choice of lodging: the Santa Fe Boarding House near the Eastside tracks -- the low-life area of town.

* * *

The fall semester was passing quickly. November brought hard frosts and snow flurries. But nothing dampened the spirit of Art 1, for Mr. Carmody was introducing a new project and everyone, except Albert, was falling under the spell of Carmody's wizardry.

"Plaster of Paris," Carmody began, his arm raised, dripping an eggshell white substance that made it appear that he was wearing one long lady's glove, "is our next project. We are going to create life-sized figures out of Paris... and who knows, perhaps they will come to life," he joked, in mocking histrionics of a late show horror host. Everyone laughed, except Albert, of course. Warming to his subject, Carmody lectured on the origin of the substance.

"Gypsum, from which plaster of Paris is made, was first mined at Montmartre, near Paris." The history lesson continued for a few minutes before Carmody shifted into a rather philosophical discussion dealing with the nature of the flour-like powder.

"When this stuff is mixed with water it recrystallizes to form a solid. The mixture on my arm is not drying, it is setting. It is forming, or reforming to its original bonds. It's going back to its former self. I guess you could say it's immortal." Carmody's voice trailed off. The momentary high seriousness of the presentation had the class squirming on the lab stools, which surrounded the demonstration table. Carmody caught himself and turned his pedagogical voice back on.

With textbook precision, he mapped out the details of the project. A pencil sketch was the student's first step. And when something acceptable emerged from most of them, Carmody brought out the chicken wire, burlap, and complexes of steel pipe. The sketches were about to undergo a magical conversion. All except Albert's, whose sketchpad was blank.

In the next few days of class, the plaster of Paris assignment created a mysterious ambience in the art room. Everyone noticed it, especially Carmody. The students worked diligently but silently in the midst of an eerie gypsum fog, like an old movie of London by gaslight. Then the room itself began to change, pliant to the personality of its new inhabitants, for now the plaster was being smeared and spread upon the chicken wire,

burlap, and steel pipe complexes. At first, the grotesque plaster skeletons made the room seem like a yawning graveyard, but as the emaciated figures were fleshed out into their final forms and clothing and color were added, the room became the haunted abode of supernatural forces. A sorcerer's workshop, with Carmody as the chief wizard and the students as his apprentices. And these apprentices, in awe of the spectres that rose menacingly out of their plaster covered hands, were subdued, as if some sacred ritual or prelude to horror were being performed.

The room also affected Albert. The spectres were catalysts to his inner sense of gloom. For a moment he cowered as he imagined that the figures were encircling him like a medieval woodcut of the Dance of Death. He sat in the back of the room, visibly nervous and yet perfectly still. It was as if he had been lowered into a glass cage of poisonous snakes at a reptile garden. Carmody eyed Albert knowingly, for he too shuddered, at least inwardly, at what was taking place.

But the role of teacher quickly reasserted itself and he heard himself chiding Albert for not having a figure, or even a sketch under way.

"I don't know what to make," Albert grumbled, forcing himself out of a trance. Snatching a murder mystery magazine from a stack of Albert's books, Carmody issued a challenge:

"Make one of your murderers, why don't you?"

His exclamation was coupled with an impatient shaking of the magazine in Albert's face. Albert's eyes brightened momentarily, and he carefully scanned Carmody's look of disgust.

Alicia, Elaine, and Terry Lynn, the three dirty legs, had been working together on a triangular arrangement of figures. After the fourth day of concentrated work, they were the first to finish their life-sized creations, replete with clothing, make-up and wigs. Proud as virgins offering a sacrifice to a sinister god, they unveiled their effort to Carmody.

"Drabbletails!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were making peasant women." But he smiled approvingly. "All right, what name for your creations do you want to put on the display mount?"

Almost in union the girls replied, "Ladies of the Night!" The class laughed loudly, except Albert, who, unnoticed by all but Mr. Carmody, was now working feverishly on his own figure.

Soon, other figures were completed, and the class beamed collectively with the show-off pride of children in their first Halloween costumes. They had created a veritable gallery of ghouls, or so it seemed to passersby in the hall who caught but a fleeting glimpse of the figures. The name that stuck, that came to be attached to these productions was "drabbletails." And it stuck *despite* protests from Carmody, and perhaps even *because* of his curious unwillingness to explain what the term meant. It was not looked up. There was simply too much excitement and eagerness among these sorcerer's apprentices to let all of Longfellow High see then- creations to bother with the details.

An all-school bulletin the next morning announced that Mr. Carmody's Art 1 class would be displaying "drabbletails" throughout the main building. By mid-morning the entire staff of janitors was wheeling the figures to strategic locations. It was a ghastly procession, these all too real figures rolling through the halls... speechless and motionless. They were an immediate hit! Pat Hillary's Ku Klux Klan figure stood ominously by the cafeteria door protecting an imaginary lily-white world from all potential threats. John Spivey's melancholy reclining boy smiled sheepishly at all who passed the principal's office. The gaunt figure of Leonard Peterson's Beethoven outside the music room, and a one-armed replica (the other arm had broken off in transit) of a worried-looking Joe Namath was propped outside Coach Skillen's office. But Alicia, Elaine, and Terri Lynn created the most popular drabbletails. Their painted ladies, now labeled and dressed more conservatively as "Peasant Women," patrolled the hall in front of the library, pensively surveying their area, as if still in their earlier role, for potential customers.

Every drabbletail shared one quality; each seemed incredibly real. The touch of the uncanny about them was attributed to Mr. Carmody's

remarkable facility with young people.

The initial excitement over, Longfellow High and Mr. Carmody's Art 1 class settled down to the remaining business of the Fall semester. Thanksgiving break was only a week away now. But things did not run as smoothly in Art 1 as before. There was a natural letdown after the plaster of Paris project even though the drabbletails continued to delight, in their own way, Longfellow's students and faculty. Even Miss Thorndike, the massive librarian, who objected to the name drabbletails (she correctly identified it as a Victorian term for prostitute), admitted a certain affinity for the stunningly lifelike figures.

Carmody was the first to observe the change in the class attitude, a change that he traced with certainty back to a bleak Monday.

It was the day Albert finally completed his project.

It was a cold, rainy, drowned dog morning. Albert wheeled his stand forward, pulled the cover sheet from his creation, and smiled his inscrutable smile. Dead silence followed. Then little Jaynie Hamlin, a junior who made a figure of a small girl with tightly woven pigtails, began to pant hoarsely, and the panting gradually heightened to a squeaky scream, and then to an uncontrollable wail. And she screamed until she fell unconscious. The dirty legs screamed, too. Many of the boys uttered expletives of horror. Carmody was speechless and motionless as if hypnotized by the frisson of terror that rippled through his body. Albert stood proudly, arms folded against his chest. His life-size figure was slightly hunched forward, a loose outline with a gray trenchcoat, black shirt, and gray trousers. Yet at first glance, the hulking size of the figure was not that apparent, nor the physical strength that Albert had molded into its arms and legs. Nor the black, matted hair.

It was the face and the raised arm that drew attention and horrified the class and transfixed Carmody. Mummy-like, the figure's face was wrapped in strips of burlap so that no facial identity penetrated the hideous countenance. There were black holes for eyes and a small black rectangle for its mouth. And in the figure's raised arm was a newly polished, stainless steel undertaker's knife poised in a stabbing position. At the bottom of the

figure's platform, scrawled in Albert's child-like printing on a sheet of white construction paper, were the words: JACK THE RIPPER.

It took several days for Carmody to calm the class and himself. Albert took advantage of the shocked silence of his classmates to point out smugly that the notorious Jack the Ripper was never caught. He detailed the gruesome Whitechapel murders of 1888 and closed his presentation with the outlandish theory that Jack the Ripper might still be alive in one form or the other. But no one listened.

Carmody's first inclination was to demand that Albert dismantle the figure immediately. Albert angrily pleaded that his creation deserved as long a life as the other drabbletails. Carmody relented but locked the unnerving figure in the art room closet after each school day and required that a sheet be kept over it during the day. Little Jaynie Hamlin transferred out of Art 1, and Mr. Madden tactfully reprimanded Carmody for letting things get out of hand.

Word of Albert's horrid drabbletail spread, bringing tittery thrill seekers into the art room for a nervous peek under the sheet. Many imagined that the threatening figure was slightly animated. And because several were deeply frightened by then- brush with Albert's "Jack," Carmody had to sentence the figure to an indefinite around-the-clock stay in the closet. Almost simultaneously the status of the other drabbletails changed, too. Students were now occasionally overheard expressing a bit of fear of the various figures, even the once much adored peasant women.

On the Friday before Thanksgiving, a freshman, Lottie Miller, screamed and began crying hysterically, claiming that one of the peasant women reached out for her as she walked past the figures. The scream could be heard all the way down to the art room. Mr. Carmody's class heard it and stopped their tie-dyeing project. Albert watched their frightened reactions closely.

The dark mood that had been gathering the previous week descended in full force on Monday. The weekend had brought a heavy snow to the flint hills protecting Masonville, and it had brought a visitor to Longfellow High. Scattered like huge bowling pins, the three drabbletails that had graced the entrance to the library were found sprawled on the floor, their clothing torn. Each had a deep gash semi-circling through their pale, chalky, lifeless throats from ear to ear. The work of schoolboy vandals? No one felt confident of that explanation. Miss Thorndike had discovered the figures early that morning and had fainted on the spot. Only later did she mention that she heard some rustling around the art room as she passed it on her way to unlock the library. But there was no vandalism in the art room. By mid-afternoon, Longfellow High was adrift in a sea of rumor. There even appeared to be some who were half-seriously suggesting that Albert's drabbletail was somehow involved. Everyone was uneasy. School was dismissed for the Thanksgiving holiday two days early. In the later afternoon, Mr. Carmody helped two very sober janitors carry the plaster corpses back to die art room. The slashing of the drabbletails served as a macabre opening to the next terror-filled weeks for Longfellow High and Masonville. On Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, the mutilated body of Alicia Forties was found in the corner of an abandoned train-checker's shack near the Eastside tracks. A week later, Elaine Brooks was discovered in a similar condition behind Fred's Cafe, about a mile from the first murder. The grotesque pattern of bodies literally ripped apart linked the two incidents. At school, the atmosphere was naturally somber. Everyone's mind was on the murders, yet few talked openly of them. Terry Lynn Caster, aware of the ominous sequence of events, walked around in a bubble of fear. Mr. Carmody and the Art 1 students, with the exception of Terri Lynn and Albert, began moving the remainder of the drabbletails back to the art room to be dismantled.

Suspects? A few names of unsavory characters and railroad tramps seen lately near the Eastside tracks were mentioned. No substantial leads came of any of them. The name that was most frequently mentioned at Longfellow High was Albert Werner, Weird Albert, the creator of that hideous drabbletail. Albert was taken into custody and questioned, questioned for three full days. Then Longfellow High and Masonville were freed from the bondage of fear.

Albert had confessed.

No, not actually confessed. He had stated rather enigmatically that he was *responsible* for the murders, and he agreed to undergo psychiatric counseling before the preliminary hearing was held. That was enough for the community. But the respite from terror was short-lived. Driven by a nebulous desire to complete his unfinished task, Albert managed to elude his counselor and the Masonville Sheriff shortly before Christmas. In the meantime, Mr. Carmody had taken each drabbletail, including Albert's, and rendered it to its former state of odorless dust.

On the evening of the day school closed for Christmas holidays, John Carmody returned to school and his art room after killing Terri Lynn Caster in the shadows beside the Transport Inn. He hesitated, finding the art room door pried open. He walked cautiously to the closet to put back the burlap strips, the dark clothing, and the undertaker's knife that had aided him twice before.

The closet door was also ajar.

As he pulled it fully open, his eye caught the image of a dark, crouched figure, still as a statue deep in the closet. He moved a few steps closer to it, peering as hard as he could into the darkness. In a split second the figure sprang and knocked him to the floor. Overpowered by the surprise of his attacker, Carmody felt the knife blade rip into his side with a grisly thud. His eyes rolled blankly before they could focus squarely on the face behind the knife.

"I know who you are, John Carmody," Albert whispered over the unmoving body.

Weak and shaken, Albert made his way to the Sheriff's office and announced he had killed the murderer of three high school girls. After several minutes of convincing, the sheriff and one deputy agreed to drive him back to the school and the art room. Still visibly shaken, Albert guided them to the room and to the closet where he had surprised John Carmody.

But Carmody was gone. No sign of him. No blood. No burlap strips. Nothing. Albert Werner walked slowly to the back of the room and dressed his ashen face into his pale, quivering hands.

"Oh, *my God,"* he cried softly, *"Jack the Ripper's still alive!"*

The Gravedigger and Death

Mary Ann Alien

"The Gravedigger and Death" appeared originally in Rosemary Pardoe's Ghosts & Scholars, *Britain's best supernatural little-magazine, specializing in ghost stories in the manner of M. R. James and nonfiction about antiquarian ghost story writers. ' 'Gravedigger" was reprinted in* The Angry Dead, *an attractive pamphlet collecting all the Mary Ann Alien ghost stories in one place, published by Jeffrey Dempsey and David Cowperthwaite, who are responsible for England's other-best little-magazine of horror.* Dark Dreams. *The author lives in a very lovely flat in touristy Cheshire.*

South Tilford on the Essex Marshes is one of the most atmospheric places in the county, and as I walked up the gravel path toward St. Peter's Church I found it hard to believe that I was still in the twentieth century. With the tall grey building ahead of me, the grey Coal Fort (built a hundred years ago but for what reason I do not know) in the near distance, and the dark, lowering sky above, I would not have been surprised to find, on looking around, that my red mini-car, which was parked by the gate, had been transformed into a horse-drawn carriage.

My name is Jane Bradshawe and I'm a church restorer. I was in South Tilford to look at some seventeenth-century wall paintings in the church, and to decide whether they could be cleaned without suffering damage. The rector, I knew, should be waiting for me inside, but when I first opened the heavy door, the building appeared empty. Then I heard a movement up at the east end and spotted a tubby, balding figure attending to a censer.

I have nothing against High Church Anglicans, but they do seem to pick the most cloying, heavy incense; the sort which is guaranteed to give me a headache in minutes. The scent, which filled this church, was no exception.

Not a good start to the visit, I thought; but Father Cranage, who came hurrying down the chancel -- hand outstretched -- as soon as he saw me, was such a sweet old fellow that I was quite unable to remain irritated with his taste in religious ritual. He led me to the west wall, on which the paintings sheltered beneath a layer of grime and peeling whitewash.

"You see, my dear, there are two figures -- one on each side of the door. They're hard to make out now, but I understand that authorities such as the *Victoria County History* believe them to be a gravedigger and Death."'

I realized that the restoration job would be dirty and difficult, but probably rewarding. "These are quite rare, you know," I told the good Father. "There are similar figures in a church in Huntingdonshire, but they're badly defaced. Wouldn't it be exciting if yours were in better condition?"

"Yes, indeed," the rector nodded, "although, curiously enough, a few of my parishioners have hinted to me that the paintings should be left alone. I've been here for forty years now, and I hope they have learned to be completely honest with me, but no one has been able to tell me *why* they believe the work shouldn't be done. I don't think they know themselves."

Later that evening, after the long drive back to my little house in Northamptonshire, I wrote my report for the Diocesan Advisory Committee, recommending that the restoration be carried out, and that I would like to do it.

A couple of weeks afterwards I was in Essex again on another job: trying in vain to rescue a hatchment, which had been crudely repainted by a well-meaning parishioner in the mistaken belief that he was "restoring" it. Before returning home, 1 decided to spend a day in the Essex Record Office, finding out what I could about South Tilford church. Searching through old, handwritten churchwardens' accounts and similar documents is a task I hate. It's hard, eye-straining work and, more often than not, it produces no results whatsoever. My luck seemed to be out on this day. I could find no information on the history of the wall paintings or their anonymous artist.

Serendipity is something, which all researchers experience from time to time. It causes the very piece of knowledge for which you've been looking to fall into your hands, usually from a totally unexpected source, just as you've given up hope of ever finding it. This was what happened when, despairing of the church records; I started to browse through the printed books in the Record Office Library. For no obvious reason, I picked up a small, dowdy green volume without a title on the spine. It proved to be *The History and Lore of the Villages of the Essex Marshes* by the Reverend Sir Adam Gordon who was, it seemed, the rector of West Tilford, the adjoining parish to South Tilford, during the early years of the nineteenth century. Turning quickly to the short chapter on South Tilford I found a section on the wall paintings. What Gordon had to say about them was most intriguing:

On the west wall [of the church] are two paintings, of a gravedigger and a skeleton. The villagers are fast forgetting the traditional reason for the making of them, so I am pleased to be able to record it here. It is said that the gravedigger was one Meshach Leach, sexton of the parish during the first part of the seventeenth century. There was a new incumbent at this time and he instructed Leach to remove an old stone from the churchyard. This object was held in heathen awe by the local people and was therefore a source of disgust to the rector. Leach protested very strongly, but he could not refuse for fear of losing his position, so he finally gave way. No one could be persuaded to help him, but unluckily, the stone was small enough for him to move unaided, and the rector made a point of overseeing the task until completed. From that day the sexton was hounded by a figure, which came to be called the "guardian." No clear description is now available, but there are hints of its being skeletal and extremely unpleasant to look upon.

> *Three weeks later the vengeful creature pursued the unhappy man even into the very church itself, and it was there that the rector discovered poor Leach, apparently dead of an apoplexy. The rector was then much troubled in his sleep and finally had the stone replaced. He commissioned Meshach's brother*

Shadrach, a sign painter, to produce the figures we see today, as a warning to future incumbents.

I cannot tell how much of this strange story is true and how much romance, but the old stone does indeed exist, and can still be seen in South Tilford churchyard, a few yards from the main path to the south door. I find myself unable to believe that a servant of Satan such as this "guardian" could have chased the unfortunate Leach into the sanctuary of a House of God. If the basic tale be true, I would suggest that the sexton injured himself when lifting the stone, causing brain-fever and hallucinations which led inevitably to his death.

I made a mental note (as a point of interest only, of course) to check whether the stone still existed, when I had the chance.

The opportunity came a month later, at the beginning of February, when I received the go-ahead from the Diocesan Advisory Committee, and arranged with Father Cranage to stay in his spare room at the rectory for the next few weeks. I anticipated a long, messy job, but with a final result which would make all the effort worthwhile.

The Essex Marshes are at their most timeless in the dark months of January and February. My feeling of not being in the twentieth century returned as I drove up to the church, and increased when I glanced over to the Thames on my right, and saw a distant line of tall ships' masts moving gracefully by. Before driving on to the rectory I slipped into the graveyard to look for the mysterious stone. Sure enough it was in the position, which the Reverend Gordon had described. I must admit to a slight feeling of relief!

Father Cranage was as jovial as ever. His house was a large and slightly decaying eighteenth-century building, but he was sensibly using only a small part of it, which was cluttered with his many possessions (including, I noted with approval, a fine little model railway layout), and exuded the

same air of gentle friendliness as the rector himself. He was slightly embarrassed in showing me to the spare room, which would be my bedroom, as it had obviously been prepared in a hurry by himself. He explained that his "daily," Mrs. Coggins, was laid up "with her legs," and so we would have to rough it. Since Mrs. Coggins' daughter was to bring in a hot meal for us every evening, it seemed like fairly luxurious "roughing it" to me.

The next day a group of local men helped me to put up a scaffolding platform in the church, and of course I paid them in the traditional way -- with money for beer! The platform needed to be no more than four feet from the ground, which was a relief to me as I dislike heights. I started on the right-hand figure -- that of the gravedigger, and work progressed splendidly. Two weeks later, "Meshach" was revealed. Despite some slight damage, his general condition was excellent.

I had told Father Cranage the story of the figures, and we both noticed that the drab brown-clad sexton had a scared and pathetically unhappy look.

"Poor old soul," said the rector, as we stood admiring my efforts late one afternoon, "I do hope the tale isn't true."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "the whole thing was invented in order to explain his sad expression."

"I hope so, I do indeed. It is a shame that our Parish Registers survive only from the middle of the seventeenth century -- probably too late for them to include the death of Meshach if it really did happen."

I nodded, but then something occurred to me. *"Meshach* Leach, if he existed, died too early, but this need not be the case with his brother Shadrach, who supposedly painted the wall. If we can find him in your records at least it will prove that the family was real."

Filled with enthusiasm we hurried to the vestry where, fortunately, the documents were being readied for loan to the Record Office, and were therefore in good order. It was a fairly simple matter to work through the

list of deaths, and a few minutes later, under May 7th 1672, we found the entry we wanted. It read:

> *Shadrak Leche, aged 73 years, son of John and Azuba,*
> *brother of Meshak,*

"Well," I said, leaning back in my chair to look at the solemn face of the rector, "we know now that there is *some* truth in the story, and that Meshach existed."

"I shall pray for him," said the good Father.

It was when I began cleaning the figure of Death that my zest for the job started to wane. During daylight hours nothing untoward happened, but February days are so short that I had to continue working after dusk had fallen. When it was really dark I switched on the electric lights in the church, but I don't like using artificial light if I can avoid it, so I tended to work in the dusk for as long as I could. In the hour or so when the setting sun was throwing disconcerting shadows behind the furnishings, I found that I was becoming increasingly disturbed. I have been in so many churches in the past seven years since leaving art school that the shadows and noises, which they all contain, don't trouble me at all; but the *physical* discomfort, which I felt at South Tilford, was unique in my experience. First the smell of incense became oppressive and intense, and inevitably my head began to ache; and then the building started to feel uncomfortably hot. The old Gurney's Patent boiler, against the north wall, heated the church very efficiently, but the temperature at this time of year should rarely have risen above 60°F. Now, in the evenings, it was rising into the nineties and making me feel positively faint.

I might have doubted the evidence of my own senses had it not been for the fact that Father Cranage noticed it too, during his frequent visits to see how

I was getting on. He called in a man to look at the boiler in case it was malfunctioning, but no fault could be found. The puzzle remained unsolved, and it was evident that the oppressiveness was slightly worse every day; consequently my headaches became harder and harder to shake off.

To add to this, neither the Father nor I were terribly happy about the second figure, which my careful cleaning was revealing. It was not the ordinary skeleton, which I had been expecting, but something altogether grotesque, although it was certainly skeletal enough. From its bones hung shreds of what might have been cloth, or flesh, and the sardonically smiling face was undoubtedly fleshed, with parchment-like skin drawn tight against the skull. If this exceedingly unpleasant creation was intended to portray Death then the artist must have wanted the congregation to fear their final hour with a frightening intensity. If, on the other hand, it *was* the guardian of the story, and then I felt very glad that the stone in the churchyard was still in position.

By early March, my work was nearing completion, much to my relief. During my final evening in the church, the oppression was worse than ever. "Another night like this," I thought to myself, "and I'd be in danger of fainting and falling off the platform. A broken leg is all I need."

As I turned around to climb down and switch on the lights, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. Had the huddled shadow behind the boiler moved? I had no time to decide before another shadow, this one definitely moving, detached itself from the gloom of the chancel and started to make its way jerkily down the church. Its motion reminded me incongruously of a child playing hopscotch, but this was no child. It was tall, bony, and impossibly thin -- perhaps I can best describe it as a huge and humanoid stick insect. As it approached the patch of darkness behind the boiler, which now seemed to resemble a cowering figure, it reached out its hideous arms and the two shadows met, and merged. I heard -- inside my head -- a terrible, hopeless scream; and then there was silence. They were gone, leaving only a slight, distasteful smell of mold in my nostrils, which the scent of incense quickly overpowered.

I realized that I was clinging on for dear life to an upright on the scaffolding; otherwise I would certainly have fallen. But not for a moment

had I felt threatened by the manifestation, which I had just seen. When the shadow was making its way toward the boiler, it was also coming in my direction, but I knew that I was not its object, and that it could not harm me. I was merely seeing a reenactment of that which had gone before.

If wall paintings are in bad condition, restorers often suggest that they be concealed beneath a layer of whitewash to protect them. The figures at South Tilford didn't need this treatment, but I recommended it anyway, and although I did not tell Father Cranage my real reasons, he was happy to agree. "I'm afraid the older members of my congregation are being frightened by the grim reaper there," he said. So, with the permission of the Diocesan authorities, the paintings were covered up.

As I see it, there is no actual danger as long as the stone remains in positron in the graveyard, but I believe that by revealing their images, I re-awakened the *shades* of "the guardian" and of poor Meshach Leach. I suspect they also haunted the church when the paintings were new, which would account for several attempts made in the following centuries to deface and hide them. Ironically they were thereby preserved hi much better condition than most contemporary work of a similar nature. By covering them up again, I hope I have "laid" the shades, at least for the time being. Whether I took this action from pity for the unquiet spirit of the sexton, or for fear of the other, I will leave you to decide.

Taking Care of Bertie

Janet Fox

> *Janet Fox is to be found in numerous major anthologies such as* Shadows *and* Year's Best Fantasy. *But a surprising percentage of her work is to be found only in little magazines, stories of enviable merit in* Fantasy Macabre, 2AM, Moonbroth, Space & Time, Whispers, Grue, Haunts, *and so on. "Screaming to Get Out" from W. Paul Ganley's* Weirdbook, *became a* Year's Best Horror *selection. My choice among many that should have bigger audiences is "Taking Care of Bertie" from the eleventh issue of Crispin Burnham's* Eldritch Tales, *a magazine riddled with notable stories.*

The place was silent, but it was not a pleasant silence. It was a stifled quiet, a drugged-into-mindless-indifference quiet, the soundlessness of nightmare where patients shuffled down mazelike corridors, somnambulant as zombies, hair matted, wrinkled cotton gowns hanging limp over slumped shoulders.

It was an uneasy quiet, broken now by a sudden outcry, a crash of falling crockery. "Get away from me! You devil, get away!" A fluster of nurses; doctor's voice ordering a tranquilizer in syllables with the ring of a foreign tongue, sobs, hysterical, diminishing until that circling quiet came round again. In restrained tones, two doctors spoke outside the door.

"Stigmata, self-induced, of course, though I must say I've never seen quite this variation before."

"The world is full of a number of things," quoted the other blithely. "That name she kept repeating. I could hardly make it out. What was it, Birdie, Bertie?"

* * *

Behind her the door closed with an authoritative "chunk," and though she'd never been here before, she was at home. She paused, awed for the moment by the small entryway with its terra-cotta tile and darkly oiled wooden paneling. As she walked on into a large living room, dust-powdered indigo drapes filtered the light, leaving the room awash in blue shadow, haunted by the substantial ghosts of sheet-draped furniture. She set down the cracked and peeling plastic suitcase and looked around, a little helplessly, which seemed out of character, even to herself. It seemed she should be shouting-for joy, but the high-ceilinged gloom oppressed her for the moment.

How was it, she asked herself, that someone could be so good at figuring things, could see angles where everybody else saw straight lines, could land on her feet, and come down running, if it came to that -- how did it follow that someone like Eve Mallory suddenly gets word she's inherited an estate from a rich aunt? This time last week she'd have laughed; that wasn't the kind of thing that really happened. That was the kind of thing that stupid people sat around waiting for while the smart ones picked them clean.

She pulled back a sheet and uncovered an immense violet couch, a dust-smell rising around her as she sat down on it. Last week she'd been living in that drafty, roach-infested duplex that Hal had gotten them before his luck and then he, himself, had run out. All the quiet spaciousness around here made her feel uneasy. It might be hard to keep remembering in this place that life was a crap game, with no rules except what you could make up as you went along. Good luck, now, that was almost scary, but she supposed she could learn to live with it.

Though she'd been lolling back on the couch, now she sat upright as a man in a dark suit came in, Cavendish, the lawyer, but she thought he'd make a better undertaker. His white, dry face was set in lines of sad sincerity and his movements were slow and deliberate. He had a way of looking at a person as if he were... measuring.

She crossed her legs, heedless of the slit skirt she wore. "I didn't know you'd be here already," she said.

"I was making arrangements," he said with a small, sour, smile.

"I suppose you brought, uh -- him."

"You do understand the full implications," said Cavendish, "Mrs. Abbott was very fond of Bertie and she wished so strongly that he have good care after her death that she made it a stipulation of the will."

"Sure, I heard all that stuff when the will was read. I still can't quite figure it out, though, why she left it all to me. She didn't even know me."

"Mrs. Abbott had become a recluse in the latter part of her life. You were the closest female relative. She chose you as a replacement for herself, so to speak. Here we are."

A large-bosomed woman in a cook's uniform was coming through the door, and on her shoulder she carried a bundle that shrieked and chattered and writhed, trying to be free of her grip. Before the woman had reached them, the thing managed to twist itself loose and, dropping to the floor like a very large, brown-furred spider and dragging a short length of chain from its collar, darted straight for Mallory. Tiny hands caught in the folds of her skirt, and as Cavendish and the cook fussed, the thing climbed, shrieking madly until it was clinging to her neck. An alien face looked into hers, bright amber eyes, minuscule fangs set among black, rubbery features that reminded her uncomfortably of those of a human being.

She screamed and tried to tear the apparition away from her, but it scratched and clung. Cavendish managed to peel it loose at last, and at the expense of his funereal composure, it hung, panting, against his vest. There was a sodden spot on Mallory's blouse that hadn't been there before, and she was still encompassed in the smell of the beast, an almost rotten smell. She saw that its fur was patchy and graying, here and there the raw pink of an open sore.

"There, there, Bertie old boy," soothed the lawyer. "Really, he wouldn't hurt you. You'll find him very affectionate. He's upset about her death, I expect. Animals are very perceptive."

"Keep hold of it. Don't let it get loose."

The portly lady in the cook's uniform sniffed before speaking. "He seems to have taken a liking to you right away, and that's a lucky thing."

"Mrs. Gibbons has agreed to report to me about whether or not you're upholding the terms of the will. You must care for Bertie as Mrs. Abbott herself would have."

"You mean I have to baby-sit that monkey, every minute?"

"I thought you understood that." He held out the animal and it reached for her with its dry little hands.

Only the part of her that saw the angles kept her from giving the two of them a few choice words. Bertie nestled against her shoulder breathing out a gust of putrid breath. She could feel its ribcage through the thin fur.

"Mrs. Abbott wanted old Bertie to be happy to the end of his life," said Cavendish.

Mallory managed a smile but knew it looked sick. "All right," she agreed silently. "I think that can be arranged. I think I can find a way to take care of Bertie."

Mallory lay back among mounded pillows on a large bed with gray silk sheets. The phone was cradled between shoulder and jaw, and with one hand she languidly fed herself chocolates, with the other she flipped the pages of a fashion magazine. The voice on the phone was painfully sincere; it detailed a long and heart-rending series of events. She listened patiently for several minutes, but her fingernails began to tap a nervous rhythm on the slick magazine pages. "Honey, if you could only spare a few thousand, I

know I could get back on my feet, and when I felt like a man again, you and I could -- "

"Flake off, creep," she said distantly into the mouthpiece and slammed down the receiver. Laughing uncontrollably she flopped back against the pillows. "Poor Hal. What a fool." She couldn't imagine why her so-called former friends thought that her little bit of good luck had turned her into a soft touch. It had been easy to get rid of them; they'd never really cared about her in the first place. It was entertaining, though, to hear the song-and-dance they went through trying to cash in on old friendships.

There were footsteps in the hallway and a gentle tapping, "Miss Mallory?"

"Sure, come in." The door opened on the white-clad bulk of Mrs. Gibbons, and a brown blur of motion darted across the floor. Bertie crawled across the bed, seepings from his sores dampening the pale silk. Mallory managed one deep breath before the smelly creature embraced her neck, chattering mindlessly next to her ear.

"It seems that Bertie got himself locked into the linen closet," said the cook, her voice edged with suspicion. "I can't think how."

She had been telling herself that the creature was so old it was bound to keel over any day, but whenever it set eyes on her it had to be near her, as it had done that first day, almost as if it understood what its former owner had tried to do. As its bony body writhed against her, she had a sudden, almost overpowering desire to get it by the neck and to squeeze -- With an effort the part of her that was good at figuring things out took control and she patted the sparse silvery fur. "Old Bertie is all over the house," she said. "How should I know how he gets into these things? He's clumsy and half blind. Almost anything could happen to him."

Mrs. Gibbons sniffed and gave her a direct look, not quite daring to voice any suspicions. The look said that if there were an accident, it had better be plausible.

Thursday was cook's day off, a day with gray skies and a chill in the air. Bertie protested loudly as Mallory tied his chain to a table leg. There were still some servants in the house, but they weren't likely to interfere. She threw some logs into the fireplace. "Perfect day for a fire, Bertie," she said, and then cursed as the match sputtered and went out. It took her some time, but eventually flames jetted from the dry wood. She warmed herself for a moment against the coldness of the large room. She laid the protective screen that was usually in place before the fire over on its back. "Too bad that screen fell, isn't it?" she asked and went over to untie the chain. The monkey climbed happily to her shoulder, but she shivered as she touched that light body, scaly patches of skin showing through the fur, the bones a fragile-framework, the breath flavored with the heavy scent of slow decay. She moved closer to the fire, and Bertie basked in the warmth, eyes shining trustingly up at her. Vaguely, she wondered why it was that she loathed the only thing that had ever seemed to feel a genuine attachment for her.

Her hands tightened on the beast's body, and with a gesture whose violence surprised even her; she thrust him into the flames. Sparks caught in the dry fur and there was an awful, an unforgettable shriek of rage and pain and fear, but in the next moment it was as if a part of the fire itself had broken loose and was leaping up at her. Flames played down long simian arms, framed the almost-human face in a fantastic aura. Fire leaped from fur to cloth as the burning creature gripped her dress. She felt pain as small fangs met in her arm.

She struck at the animal and at the flames; not knowing where one left off and the other began. She thought she felt bones give way beneath her palm as she struck, and she couldn't have said herself what happened, detail by detail, except that when it was over she found herself smothering the last sparks of fire on her clothing and keeping an eye on a small, charred body lying near the hearth wreathed in bluish smoke. Her hands had been burned; she was beginning to feel the first twinges of pain as a wild-eyed maid ran into the room. Mallory knelt by the body. "Oh, poor Bertie," she moaned, one eye on the servant. "I couldn't save you. I tried. I really tried." She wasn't sure what Gibbons and Cavendish would think, but that didn't matter now. She even had burns to prove she'd tried to save the little bastard. Talk about landing on your feet -- nobody did it better. And now she was free.

Restraints kept the patient from harming herself as she moved restlessly on the bed. For some time there was only more of the all-consuming silence in the room. It seemed to seep inward through the cold pale walls of the place. Then with a start, the patient regained consciousness. Her eyes inspected the room minutely; as a nurse came to stand over her, uniform a subdued rustling. Her gaze roved, caught at a point in mid-air as if something were suspended overhead. Despite her training, the nurse looked, too, but of course there was nothing.

"No! Get away! Bertie, you're burning me! Your eyes!"

The words attenuated to a shriek, and the patient convulsed against the straps. On the white skin of her throat appeared sudden red marks, the print of tiny teeth, clear until welling blood effaced the outlines. Another nurse joined the first, helping her to give an injection. As the nurse held the patient's arm, another bite mark appeared on the wrist. "Hard to believe," she said in hushed tones, her face shaken a little from its usual professional calm, "that a person's mind could inflict this."

'She seems to see an imaginary demon of some kind. Personally, I'm just as glad it *is* inside her head."

When this particular seizure had subsided, the nurses left the room hastily; neither would admit that they did so because after these episodes, the place always reeked with the pungent scent of burning hair.

Cardinal Napellus

Gustav Meyrink

A prime function of small horror magazines should be the presentation of works in translation. The genre's major anthologies and magazines have been so cliquish and parochial (or so commercial and banal) that the rest of the world's most famous macabre writers have been excluded. Sad to say, the smaller magazines haven't done a good deal better, failing to fill this obvious need and niche. Two exceptions are Greg Boyd's Asylum and my own Fantasy Macabre. It should strike you as outrageous that authors of such importance as Gustav Meyrink and Theophile Gautier could have, throughout a century, untranslated stories. Meyrink has been especially neglected in spite of his excellence and the fact that his novel The Golem is widely regarded as a premiere work of weird fiction. Michael Bullock translated “Cardinal Napellus,” an influential German story, for Fantasy Macabre. It has its first sizeable audience right here.

We didn't know very much about him apart from his name, Hieronymus Radspieller, and the fact that year in year out he lived in the ruined castle, where he had rented from the owner, a white-haired, surly Basque -- the surviving servant and heir of a noble family that had withered in melancholy solitude -- a whole floor to himself, rendering it habitable with costly, old-fashioned furnishings.

One was struck by the fantastic contrast on entering these rooms from the overgrown wilderness outside, in which no bird ever sang and everything seemed abandoned by life, except when every now and then the rotted yew trees with their tangled beards groaned in terror under the violence of the Fohn, or the greenish-black lake, like an eye staring up into the sky, reflected the white clouds passing overhead.

Hieronymus Radspieller used to spend almost all day in his boat, lowering a flashing metal egg down into the silent water on long, fine silk threads -- a

plummet to test the depth of the lake.

He must be employed by some geographical society, we conjectured when, after returning home from our fishing trips, we sat together for a few hours in Radspieller's library, which he had hospitably placed at our disposal.

"I happened to hear today from an old post woman who carries the letters over the mountain pass that according to rumor he was a monk in his youth and used to flog himself bloody night after night. They say his back and arms are covered all over with scars," interposed Mr. Finch when the conversation had once again become an exchange of ideas concerning Hieronymus Radspieller. "And by the way, wherever has he got to today? It must be well past eleven o'clock."

"It's full moon," said Giovanni Braccesco, pointing out through the open window with his withered hand at the shimmering path of light that lay across the lake. "We shall easily be able to see his boat if we keep a lookout."

Then after a while, we heard steps coming up the stairs; but it was only the botanist Eshcuid who entered the room so late from one of his expeditions.

He was carrying in his hand a plant as tall as a man, with steel-blue blossoms.

"It is by far the largest example of this species that has ever been found. I should never have believed that the poisonous 'monkshood' could ever grow to such a height," he said in a flat voice, after nodding to us in greeting and laying the plant on the windowsill, taking the greatest possible care that none of the leaves should get doubled over.

The thought passed through my mind, "He's just like the rest of us," and I had the feeling that Mr. Finch and Giovanni Braccesco were thinking the same thing at this moment. "An old man, he wanders restlessly about the earth like someone who has to look for his grave and can't find it, collecting plants which tomorrow are dried up. Why? What for? He doesn't think about it. He knows that his actions are pointless, as we know that ours are, but he must also have been crushed by the melancholy realization that

everything a man begins is pointless, whether it is great or small -- just as this realization has been crushing the rest of us a whole life long. We have been from our youth like the dying," I felt, "whose fingers grope restlessly over the sheet; who do not know what to grasp at. Like the dying who admit to themselves: death is standing in the room, what does he care whether we fold our hands or clench them into fists?"

"Where will you go when the fishing season is over here?" asked the botanist, after he had taken another look at his plant and then slowly sat down with us at the table.

Mr. Finch ran his fingers through his white hair, played with a fishhook without looking up and wearily shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," Giovanni Braccesco answered absent-mindedly after a pause, as though the question had been directed to him.

An hour must have passed in leaden, wordless silence, so that I could hear the blood roaring in my head.

At last Radspieller's pallid, beardless face appeared in the doorway.

His bearing seemed that of a calm old man, as always, and his hand was steady as he poured himself a glass of wine and drank to us; but an unfamiliar atmosphere filled with restrained excitement had come in with him and quickly spread to us.

His generally weary and indifferent eyes -- which had the peculiarity that like the eyes of those suffering from a disease of the spinal cord their pupils never contracted or expanded and apparently did not react to light (they looked like gray matt silk waistcoat buttons with a black dot in them, as Mr. Finch used to say) -- today darted about the room glittering feverishly, slid along the walls and over the rows of books, undecided where they should rest.

Giovanni Braccesco took a subject at random and talked about our strange methods of catching the ancient, moss-grown giant catfish that live down in the unfathomable depths of the lake, never came up into the light of day,

and despise all the bait offered by nature -- who snap only at the most bizarre shapes the angler can think up: glittering tin-plate shaped like hands whirling and spinning at the end of the line, or bats of red glass with cunningly concealed hooks on their wings.

Hieronymus Radspieller wasn't listening.

I could see that his mind was wandering.

He suddenly broke out, like someone who has held back a dangerous secret behind clenched teeth for years on end and then, in an instant, without warning, hurls it from him: "Today at last -- my plumb line touched bottom."

We stared at him uncomprehendingly.

I was so seized by the oddly trembling tone that had echoed from his words that for a while I only half took in his description of measuring the depth of the lake. Down in the abysses -- many thousands of fathoms deep -- there were circling whirlpools that caught up the plummet, held it in suspension and prevented it from reaching the bottom, unless some fortunate chance came to its aid.

Then again a sentence rose triumphantly aloft from his speech like a rocket: "It is the deepest place on earth to which a human instrument has ever penetrated." The words burned themselves into my brain, without my being able to find any reason why they should. They contained some ghostly double meaning, as though an invisible being had been standing behind him and speaking to me through his mouth in veiled symbols.

I could not take my eyes from Radspieller's face. How spectral and unreal it had all of a sudden become! When I closed my eyes for an instant I saw it encircled by flickering blue flames. "The St. Elmo's fire of death," forced its way to my tongue and I had to keep my lips closed by force of will in order not to yell it out.

As though in a dream, passages from books passed through my mind which Radspieller had written and which I had read in leisure hours, filled with amazement at his learning, passages filled with searing hatred of religion, faith and hope and everything in the Bible that speaks of promise.

This, I dimly perceived, was the backlash with which his soul had slashed down at the earth from the realm of longing after the burning asceticism of a passion-tormented youth -- the pendulum of Fate that swings man from light into darkness.

With a violent effort I wrenched myself free from the paralyzing half-sleep that had come over my senses, and forced myself to listen to Radspieller's story, the beginning of which was still echoing in me like a distant, unintelligible murmur.

He was holding the copper plumb line in his hand, turning it this way and that so that it flashed like a piece of jewelry in the light of the lamp, and saying:

"As passionate anglers you consider it an exciting feeling when you merely feel from the sudden tug on your line, which is only two hundred ells long, that a large fish has taken the bait, that in a moment or two a green monster will rise to the surface and thrash the water to foam. Just imagine this feeling multiplied a thousand-fold and you will perhaps understand what went on inside me when this piece of metal here at last announced to me: I have hit bottom. It was as though my hand had knocked at a door -- It was the end of decades of labor," he added in any undertone to himself, and there was fear in his voice: "What -- what shall I do tomorrow?"

"It is no small matter for science to have sounded out the deepest point on the surface of the earth," commented the botanist Eshcuid.

"Science -- for science?" reiterated Radspieller abstractedly, looking at us questioningly one after the other. "What do I care about science?" he finally burst out.

Then he rose hurriedly.

Walked a few times up and down the room.

"Science matters as little to you as it does to me, Professor," he exclaimed almost roughly, turning to Eshcuid. "Be frank: science merely serves us as an excuse for doing something, anything, no matter what. Life, terrible, awful life has dried up our souls, has stolen our most essential, innermost self, and in order not to have constantly to scream in our distress we pursue childish fancies -- in order to forget what we have lost. Let's not lie to ourselves."

We remained silent.

"But there's another meaning in them too" -- he was suddenly overcome by wild unrest -- "in our fancies, I mean. A subtle spiritual instinct tells me: every action we perform has a magic double meaning. We cannot do anything that is not magic. I know exactly why I have been taking soundings for almost a lifetime. I also know the meaning of the fact that over and over again I have touched bottom and linked myself by a long, thin cord through all the whirlpools to a realm to which no ray of that hateful sun can penetrate, whose delight consists in causing its children to die of thirst. It is only an outwardly unimportant event that took place today, but anyone who can see and interpret recognizes from the shapeless shadow on the wall who has stepped in front of the lamp." He smiled at me grimly. "I will tell you briefly what this outward event means to me inwardly: I have attained what I was seeking. Henceforth I am proof against the venomous snakes of faith and hope, which can only live in the light; I felt it by the way my heart jumped today when I triumphed and I touched the bottom of the lake with the plummet. An insignificant outer happening revealed its inner face."

"Did such terrible things happen to you in life? I mean during the time when you were a priest?" asked Mr. Finch, adding in an undertone to himself: "That your soul should be so sore."

Radspieller did not reply and seemed to be seeing a vision that had risen up before him. Then he sat down at the table again, stared fixedly out of the window into the moonlight, and speaking as though in his sleep and almost without breath told the following story.

"I was never a priest; but even in my youth a somber, irresistible urge drew me away from things of this earth. I have experienced hours when the face of nature was transformed before my eyes into a grinning demonic mask and mountains, landscapes, water, and sky, even my own body, appeared to me as implacable prison walls. I'm sure no child feels anything when the shadow of a cloud passing across the sun falls on a meadow -- even then I was overcome by a paralyzing horror, and as though a hand had suddenly torn a blindfold from my eyes I saw deep into the secret world filled with the death agony of millions of tiny creatures which, hidden beneath the blades and roots of the grass, were tearing each other to shreds in mute hatred.

"Perhaps it was a congenital taint -- my father died suffering from religious mania -- that caused me before to see the whole earth as nothing but one single blood-drenched den of murderers.

"Gradually my whole life became a constant torture of mental thirst. I could no longer sleep, no longer think, and day and night, without pause, my lips twitched and trembled and mechanically formed the sentence of the prayer, 'Deliver us from evil,' until weakness made me lose consciousness.

"In the valleys of my home country there is a religious sect called the Blue Brothers, whose adherents, when they feel their end approaching, have themselves burned alive. Their monastery is still standing today and over its entrance gate the stone crest: a poisonous plant with five blue petals, the uppermost of which resembles a monk's hood -- the Aconitum napellus or blue monkshood.

“I was a young man when I took refuge in this order, and almost an old man when I left it.

"Behind the monastery walls lies a garden and in it, during the summer, there blossoms a bed full of this deadly blue plant which the monks water with the blood from the wounds inflicted by flogging themselves. Each monk, when he becomes a brother of the community, has to plant one of these flowers, which then, as at baptism, receives his own Christian name.

"Mine was called Hieronymus and drank my blood while I myself wasted away over the years, vainly entreating the 'Invisible Gardener' to perform a miracle and refresh the roots of my life with just one drop of water.

"The symbolic meaning of this strange ceremony of baptism by blood is that man should magically plant his soul in the garden of Paradise and fertilize its growth with the blood of his desires.

"On the burial mound of the founder of this ascetic sect, the legendary Cardinal Napellus, so the story runs," one of these blue monkshoods shot up to the height of a man in a single moonlit night, covered all over with blossoms, and when the grave was opened the corpse had vanished. The saint was said to have changed himself into the plant, the first to appear on earth, and all others are supposed to be derived from this one.

"When the flowers dried up in the autumn we used to collect their poisonous seeds, which look like tiny human hearts and according to the secret tradition of the Blue Brothers represent the 'mustard seed' of faith which enables him who possesses it to move mountains; then we ate them.

"Just as their terrible poison changed the heart and put a man in the state between living and dying, so the essence of faith was supposed to transform our blood, to turn it into a miracle-working force in the hours between gnawing death agony and ecstatic rapture.

"But I groped with the plummet of my knowledge even deeper down into these strange allegories. I took a step further and faced the question: What will happen to my blood when the poison of the blue flower has finally impregnated it?

"And then the things around me came to life, the very stones by the wayside cried out to me with a thousand voices: again and again, when spring comes, it will be poured out so that a new poison-plant can sprout bearing your own name.

"And at that moment I had torn the mask from the vampire which till then I had been feeding, and an inextinguishable hatred took possession of me. I went out into the garden and stamped into the ground the plant that had

stolen my name Hieronymus from me and had battened on my life, until not a fiber was to be seen.

"From then on, my path seemed to be strewn with miraculous events.

"That selfsame night a vision appeared to me: Cardinal Napellus, in his hand -- his fingers in the position of a man holding a burning candle -- the blue aconite with the five-pedaled flowers. His features were those of a corpse; only from his eyes there radiated indestructible life.

"I thought that I was looking at my own face, so closely did he resemble me, and in involuntary terror I reached for my face, as someone whose arm had been torn off in an explosion may reach with the other hand for the wound.

"Then I crept into the refectory and in a fit of wild hate broke open the shrine that was supposed to contain the relics of the saint, in order to destroy them.

"I found only that terrestrial globe, which you see there in the niche."

Radspieller rose, took it down, placed it in front of us on the table and went on with his story. "I took it with me on my flight from the monastery in order to smash it and so destroy the only tangible object left by the founder of the sect.

"Later I decided that I should be showing-more contempt for the relic if I sold it and gave the money to a whore. 1 did so at the first opportunity that presented itself.

"Since then many years have passed, but I have never allowed a minute to go by without seeking to trace the invisible roots of the plant which is making mankind sick, to extirpate it from my heart. I said earlier that from the moment when I awoke to lucidity one 'miraculous event' after the other crossed my path, but I remained firm: no will-o'-the-wisp again enticed me into the morass.

"When I began to collect antiques -- everything you see here in this room dates from that period -- there were many objects among them that reminded me of the dark rites of gnostic origin and of the century of the Camisards. Even this sapphire ring on my finger -- curiously enough, it bears as a crest a monkshood, the emblem of the blue monks -- came into my hands by chance as I was rummaging through the stock of a peddler: it didn't shake me for a second. And when one day a friend sent me as a gift this globe -- the same globe I had stolen from the monastery and sold, the relic of Cardinal Napellus -- I couldn't help laughing loudly when I recognized it, laughing at this childish threat on the part of silly

Destiny.

"No, the poison of faith and hope shall no longer force its way up to me in the clear, thin air of this mountain world. At these heights the blue monkshood cannot flourish. In me the old saying has attained truth in a new sense: He who wishes to plumb the depths must climb the mountains.

"Therefore shall I never again go down into the lowlands. I have been cured; and if the wonders of all the worlds of the angels fell in my lap, I should cast them from me like contemptible rubbish. Let aconite remain a poisonous drug for those with diseased hearts and for the weaklings of the valleys -- I shall live up here and die in the presence of the rigid, adamantine law of the immutable necessities of nature, which no demonic specter can infringe. I shall go on and on taking soundings, without aim and without longing, joyful as a child that is content with the game and has not yet been infected by the lie that life has a deeper purpose. I shall go on and on taking soundings, but whenever I touch bottom I shall hear a shout of joy announcing: it is only the earth I am touching and nothing but the earth, the same proud earth that coldly throws back into space the hypocritical light of the sun, the earth that remains true to itself inside and out, just as this globe, the last wretched heirloom of the great Cardinal Napellus, is and remains stupid wood inside and out.

"And every time the jaws of the lake will announce to me afresh: it is true that on the crust of the earth, engendered by the sun, there grow horrible poisons, but its interior, its ravines and abysses, are free from them and the depths are pure." Hectic patches appeared on Radspieller's face from

excitement and a crack ran through his emphatic speech; his suppressed hate broke out. "If I had one wish" -- he clenched his fists -- "I would like to be able to sound with my plummet right down into the center of the earth, so that I could cry out: Look here, look here, earth, nothing but earth!"

We looked up in surprise, because he suddenly fell silent.

He had gone over to the window.

The botanist Eshcuid took out a magnifying glass, bent down over the globe and said loudly, in an effort to obliterate the painful impression that Radspieller's last words had made upon us:

"The relic must be a forgery dating from our own century. All five continents" -- he pointed to America -- "are drawn on the globe."

Sober and everyday as this sentence sounded, it could not break through the oppressive mood that began to take possession of us without visible cause and grew from second to second till it became a menacing sensation of fear.

Suddenly a sweet, stupefying odor as though from a bird-cherry tree or a spurge laurel seemed to pervade the room.

"It's drifting across from the park," I was about to say, but Eshcuid forestalled my convulsive attempt to shake off the nightmare. He stuck a pin into the globe and murmured something like, "It's strange, but even our lake, such a tiny dot, is shown on the map" -- when Radspieller's voice burst out again by the window and interrupted with shrill scorn:

"Why doesn't the image of His Eminence the great Cardinal Napellus pursue me anymore, as it used to both sleeping and waking? In the Codex Nazaraeus, the book of the gnostic blue monks written two hundred years before Christ, it is prophesied for the neophytes: 'He who waters the mystic plant with his blood until the end, him will it faithfully guide to the gates of everlasting life; but into the face of him who pulls it up, the blasphemer, it will gaze in the shape of death, and his spirit will wander out into the darkness until the new spring comes.' Where have those words gone? Are they dead? I say: a promise made thousands of years ago has shattered upon

me. Why doesn't he come, so that I can spit on his face, Cardinal Nap...” A whimpering rattle tore the last syllable from Radspieller's mouth. I saw that he had caught sight of the blue plant, which the botanist had placed on the windowsill as he came in, and that he was staring at it. I was about to jump up. To hurry over to him.

A cry from Giovanni Braccesco held me back.

Under Eshcuid's pin the yellow parchment skin of the globe had peeled back like the rind of an over-ripe fruit, and naked in front of us lay a big, glittering sphere of glass.

And within it -- a miraculous work of art -- fused with it in some incomprehensible manner, was the erect figure of a cardinal in scarlet robe and hat, and in his hand, with the fingers in the position of a man carrying a burning candle, he held a plant bearing steel-blue five-pedaled flowers.

Paralyzed with horror, I was barely able to turn my head toward Radspieller.

With white lips, his features corpse-like, he stood by the wall, erect, motionless like the statuette in the glass sphere, like it holding in his hand the poisonous blue flower, and staring across to the table into the face of the Cardinal.

Only the scream in his eyes revealed that he was still alive, but we others realized that his spirit had sunk beyond recall into the night of madness.

Eshcuid, Mr. Finch, Giovanni Braccesco, and I parted next morning; without a word, almost without farewell. The last fearful hours of the night had been too full of talk for all of us, not to put a spell on our tongues.

For long I roamed over the face of the earth aimlessly and alone, but I never met any of them again.

Only once, after many years, did my path lead me back into that district. Of the castle there was nothing standing but the walls; but between the fallen

masonry there rose to the height of a man in scorching, glaring sun, plant beside plant, an endless steel-blue bed of -- Aconitum Napellus.

The Coffeepot

Theophile Gautier

Although too few small horror magazines make an effort to present tales in translation, the more general small presses have been issuing such fine collections of weird tales as Wolfgang Hildesheimer's Collected Stories (Ecco Press), Jean Muno's Glove of Passion, Voice of Blood (Owl Creek Press), Merce Rodereda's My Christina and Other Stories (Greywolf), and Ryunosuke Akutagawa's Cogwheels and Other Stories (Mosaic Press, Canada). I can't help but repeat my criticism of the specifically supernatural-oriented small magazines failing to feature similarly important works of other nations. In editing Fantasy Macabre, I've tried to live up to my ideal and feature stories from France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy. One such inclusion was by France's great Romanticist, Theophile Gautier, whose "The Coffeepot" had never been translated into English until Phyllis Ann Karr tackled the job.

Last year a young fellow artist invited the three of us -- Arrigo Cohic, Pedrino Borgnioli, and me -- to spend a few days at his family estate in the heart of Normandy.

The weather, which had beamed with fair promises at our departure, took the notion for a sudden change, and rain made rushing riverbeds of the sunken roads we traveled. We sank to our knees in mud, while thick cushions of slime gathered on the soles of our boots to weigh down our steps. We did not stagger in until an hour after sunset.

Our host, observing our efforts to stifle our yawns and hold our eyes open, had us conducted to our separate chambers immediately after supper.

My chamber was vast. On entering it I felt something like a fever-chill, for it seemed to me that I was entering a new world.

The Four Seasons as Boucher had left them painted above the door, the furniture overburdened with rococo ornamentation in the worst of taste, the heavily sculptured wall panels... all combined to make me feel that I had been transported back to the early eighteenth century of Philippe d'Orleans.

Nothing was out of place. The dressing table with its boxes, combs, and powder puffs might have been used yesterday. Two or three gowns in fabrics that changed color with the changing light, and a fan embroidered with silver spangles, lay strewn on the well-waxed parquet. To my considerable astonishment, a tortoiseshell snuffbox sitting open on the mantle piece was full of snuff, still fresh.

I noticed these only after the servant, leaving his candlestick on the bedside table, had wished me goodnight and departed. Then, I confess, I began to shake like a leaf. Undressing quickly, I lay down, and, to be done with these fears, shut my eyes and turned to the wall without delay.

But I found rest impossible. My eyelids kept snapping open as the bed surged like a wave beneath me, compelling me to roll over and look.

The fire cast its red-orange reflections from the fireplace into the chamber, pricking out the tapestry figures and brightening the age-darkened portraits of knights lapped in iron plate, periwigged counselors, and beautiful ladies with rouged faces, powdered hair, and rose in hand -- our host's ancestors.

All at once the fire made a strange shift. A pale glimmer lit the room, and I saw clearly that what I had taken for painted likenesses were living people. Their eyes moved, giving off a curious twinkle. Their lips parted and pursed as if they were speaking, though I heard only the tick-lock of the timepiece and the soft whisper of the autumn wind.

Stark terror caught me in its grip, the hair rose up on my head, my teeth chattered nearly to breaking, and cold sweat bathed my whole body.

The clock tolled eleven. The reverberation of the final stroke was a long time dying, and when it had faded completely away at last...

Oh, no, I dare not tell what happened then! Nobody would believe me. Everyone would take me for a madman.

Nevertheless: the candles flamed up unaided. The bellows, wheezing like an asthmatic old man, blew at the fire with no visible hands to work them, while the tongs poked among the embers and the shovel picked up the ashes.

Next, a coffeepot hopped from the table on which it had been sitting and made its way, clip-clop, across the floor to the fireplace, where it settled down on the embers. A few minutes later, the armchairs bestirred themselves and, clumping to their delicately carven legs to surprising effect, waddled into place around the hearth.

I did not know what to make of what I was seeing, but what remained for me to see was more extraordinary still.

The most ancient portrait of all, a fat and chubby-cheeked graybeard who looked exactly like my mental image of Sir John Falstaff, pulled a face and poked his head out of the picture frame. Managing, after valiant efforts, to squeeze his shoulders and ample girth through the frame's narrow boundaries, he jumped heavily to the floor.

Hardly stopping to catch his breath, he drew from his doublet pocket a tiny little key, blew into it to make sure the shank was clear, and applied it to all the other picture frames, each in turn. And all the other frames widened until the figures they enclosed could come out with ease.

Spruce little abbes; sere, withered dowagers; solemn magistrates weighed down by voluminous black robes; dandies in silk stockings and prunella breeches, who minced forth twirling their swords point in air -- all these personages presented so quaint a spectacle that I could not help laughing in spite of my fear.

The company took their seats around the fireplace, and the coffeepot leaped up lightly onto the table. A crowd of Japanese porcelain cups in blue "and white, each with its lump of sugar and dainty silver spoon, bustled forward from the shelves of a desk, and the worthy assemblage drank coffee.

After it was drunk, cups, spoons, and coffeepot cleared themselves away in a twinkling, and conversation began -- surely the most curious colloquy I ever witnessed, for none of these bizarre conversationalists glanced at one another: the whole time they chatted together, they watched the clock.

I could not keep my own eyes from turning in its direction, nor stop myself from watching the hand that advanced step by minute step toward twelve o'clock.

Midnight sounded at last, and with it a voice announced, in exactly the same timbre as the clock tones:

"The hour has come to dance."

All the people stood. The armchairs retreated of their own accord, and each gallant took a lady by the hand, while the same voice went on:

"Now let the music play!"

Of the two tapestries hanging on opposite walls, one depicted an Italian concert and the other a stag hunt with several attendant hornsmen. The musicians and hunters, who had shown no sign of life until this moment, now nodded in unison. Lifting his baton, the maestro signaled a harmony of dance music that burst forth from both ends of the room at once.

The dancers began doing a minuet, but its sedate bows and courtesies were out of time with the musicians' giddy allegro, and in a few minutes every last couple was spinning round the floor like a musical top. The ladies' silken gowns, whipped about in this whirl of dancing, gave off a rustle which made me think of the sound of wings of a flight of pigeons. The wind that rushed underfoot billowed their skirts until they looked like swinging bells.

The violinists passed their bows so rapidly over the strings that electric sparks showered forth, the flutists' fingers bounced up and down as if they were quicksilver, the hornsmen's cheeks puffed out like balloons, and it all flowed together to form a torrent of notes and trills so vivace, ascending and descending scales so marvelously capriccioso, that the very imps of hell could not have kept up with it for two minutes together.

And all these dancing portraits -- it was piteous to behold their efforts at catching up with the cadence! They hopped, capered, executed pirouettes, ballet leaps, and entrechats three feet high. The sweat rolled down their faces to wash away their rouge and beauty patches. But their efforts were in vain -- the orchestra always stayed three or four notes ahead.

When the clock struck one, they paused. Then I first saw her: the woman who had not been dancing.

She sat in a wing chair in the shadow of the fireplace, and did not appear to be taking the slightest part in what went on around her.

Never, not even in my dreams, had I gazed on such perfection! Radiant white skin, silvery blond hair, long lashes shading blue eyes so pure, so transparent, that through them I glimpsed her soul as clearly as one can see a pebble at the bottom of a clean brook.

And I sensed that, if ever it would be given me to love anyone, this was she. Bounding up from the bed where I had huddled motionless until now, I hurried toward her -- borne along by some impulse I could not analyze -- and found myself courting her ardently, holding one of her hands in both of mine and talking with her as if we had known each other for twenty years.

But, curiously, all the while we conversed, my head kept nodding in time to the music (which had never stopped playing), and even though I was at the height of happiness simply talking with such a woman, my feet burned to dance with her.

And yet I dared not ask her!

She seemed to understand without words. Using one of the fingers I was not pressing between my own, she pointed at the clock arid told me: "When its hand reaches there, dear Theodore, and then we'll see."

Somehow I felt no surprise when she called me by name, and we chatted on.

The appointed hour sounded at last, the silver-bell voice rang once more through the chamber: "Dance with him if you please, Angela, but you know what will come of it."

"That makes no difference," Angela replied in a sulky tone, and passed her ivory arm around my shoulders.

“Prestissimo!" cried the voice.

And we began to waltz. Her bosom touched my chest, her velvet cheek grazed mine, and her soft breath brushed my lips.

Never before in my life had I undergone anything like this! My nerves thrilled as if they were steel springs, my blood was a torrent of lava surging through my arteries, and my heart might have been a ticking watch suspended from my ears.

Yet there was nothing painful in my plight. Joy ineffable buoyed me along, and I could have wished to go on this way forever. Although the orchestra had trebled its tempo, we glided effortlessly in time with the music.

The onlookers, standing in awe of our liveliness, cheered and clapped with all their might -- without, however, making a sound.

All at once Angela seemed exhausted. After dancing so long with marvelous vitality and grace, suddenly she dragged on my shoulder as if her legs had given way. Her tiny toes, which had appeared scarcely to tickle the parquet a moment before, now pulled up from it as slowly as if her slippers were weighted with lead.

"Angela," I said, "you're worn out. Let's rest a while."

"1 would like that very much," she replied, wiping her forehead with her handkerchief. "But while we've been dancing, everyone else has sat down. There's only one free armchair, and two of us."

"Where's the problem, my angel? You shall sit on my lap."

Angela made not the least objection, but sat, circling me with her arms as with a white sash and resting her head on my heart to warm herself again, for she had become cold as marble.

How long we remained like this, I do not know. Entirely absorbed in contemplating this rare and wondrous being in my arms, I lost all idea of the place and the hour. The real world no longer existed for me, and all the ties, which bound me to it, were dissolved. My soul, disentangled from its prison of clay, swam among the potentials of the infinite, and I understood what no human can understand. Angela's thoughts came to me without her needing to speak, for her soul glowed in her body as in an alabaster lamp, and the rays that shone from her breast penetrated mine through and through.

A lark sang.

Pale gray light played upon the curtains.

The instant Angela saw it, she started up and darted away with a farewell wave. But after a few steps she gave a cry and fell full length.

Thunderstruck, I sprang forward to help her...

Merely to remember it makes my blood run cold. I found nothing but the coffeepot, broken into a thousand pieces.

The sight filled me with such horror that, convinced I had been the butt of some diabolic joke, I fainted dead away.

I awoke on my bed, with Arrigo Cohio and Pedrino Borgnioli hovering beside my pillow. As soon as I opened my eyes, Arrigo exclaimed,

"Well, well, good morning! I've stood here almost an hour rubbing your temples with cologne water. What the devil were you doing last night? When you didn't come down this morning, I came up and found you laid out flat on the floor, tricked up in full evening dress, hugging a piece of broken porcelain as if it had been a pretty young woman."

"Good heavens, he's wearing my grandfather's wedding suit!" Heaving into my line of sight, our host lifted a coattail of rose-colored silk dotted with floral sprigs in green. "Yes, here are those rhinestone and filigree buttons Grandfather always used to brag about."

"Our friend must have found it tucked away somewhere and taken a fancy to try it on," said Borgnioli. Then, turning to me, "But why in the world did you faint, Theodore? That's a trick of your white-shouldered social butterfly -- undo her laces, take off her necklaces, and loosen her sash, and there you both have a fine chance not to stand on too much ceremony."

I answered dryly, "It was a simple touch of vertigo. I am subject to such fits."

I got up, changed my ridiculous costume, and we went down to breakfast.

My three companions ate a good deal and drank still more.

As for me, with memories of the night just past flurrying through my head, I ate almost nothing.

The rain, which was falling in torrents, kept us indoors after breakfast. We filled our time as best we could. Borgnioli tapped out military marches on the windowpanes. Arrigo and our host played checkers. I took a sheet of vellum paper from my portfolio and started to doodle.

With no conscious thought or intention of mine, the lines my pencil traced so lightly on the paper flowed into the most uncannily accurate sketch of

the coffeepot that had played such an important part in the scenes of the previous night.

Our host had finished his game and come to look over my shoulder. "It's astonishing," he remarked, "how much like my sister Angela that looks."

I stared at my drawing. What I had seen a moment before as a coffeepot was in fact the beautiful, wistful profile of the lady with whom I had danced, the lady who had rested on my lap.

"By all the saints in heaven!!" I cried, my voice shaking as if my life depended on the reply. "Is she living or dead?"

"Dead. She took a chill two years ago, after a ball, and died of pneumonia."

"Oh." Sadly blinking back a tear, I put the drawing away in my portfolio.

I had just received my sentence. There would be no more happiness for me upon this earth!

Seven

Stephen-Paul Martin

Stephen-Paul Martin is a regular contributor to Greg Bayd's Asylum *where I first encountered his work and wrote to him, through Greg, for contributions to my own* Fantasy & Terror. *I wasn't at that time aware of his being an editor for Manhattan's stunningly beautiful arts and literary journal* Central Park, *which strives to remain less complacent and conservative than the average lit-mag.*

"Seven", is from the June 1987 Asylum, *the fairy tale issue. The author has recently put together a collection of his work and is presently showing it to publishers, who will prove themselves dunderheads if Stephen has trouble placing it for publication.*

Donald Storm was an actuary, a rare position that only a few ever reach. You have to pass lots of qualifying tests, have incredible patience in filling out forms and a flair for working with numbers. Most actuaries are highly respected, but also regarded as bores, because they've had to devote so much of their lives to numbers, and not in the sort of mechanical way that might allow them to think about other things when they're doing it. No, they've got to be fully immersed in statistical problems all day long, and when they come home they don't have much to say, and no time to work up some kind of hobby, since on weekends they've got to be concerned with insurance premiums, just like on a business day. It's a highly paid but deadly profession, or so most people think.

As Donald Storm walked down the street he was irritated, turning over and over in his mind how he disliked being thought of as a bore, lumped into a category he couldn't identify with one bit. He was just about to smile at the doorman of the Park Avenue building he worked in, push through the revolving doors and press the appropriate button, step into the elevator

filled with Muzak, when suddenly, from a low black cloud, lightning struck his neck, splitting his torso, knocking his hatless head off onto the pavement. A Doberman nearby bolted over, tore off his arm, chewed it up a little bit, and then bit off his hand, bounding down the street with the fingers twitching. The dog had dragged his body into the street, where a limousine squashed his right leg and cut clean through the left, and a few seconds later a bird came down, bit off his penis, flew through the stormy sky until a harsh gust blew it free, and it fell toward Montauk Point.

To make a long story short, Donald Storm was soon scattered all over the place, in seven sections, taken there by every conceivable mode of transportation. His legs ended up in Teaneck, New Jersey, and Taos, New Mexico; his head in Oak Ridge, Tennessee; his right hand in a garbage can in Brooklyn; his left in a mall in Maine; his dick -- as I said before -- in Montauk; and his necktie, still neatly stretching down his chest, was carried on the Missouri River into the north Midwest; while his tie clasp -- knocked loose into one of his shoes, ended up in a small stone Catholic church on the Baja peninsula.

This all happened rather quickly. In fact, it happened in the amount of time it took you to read from Donald's death to the Baja peninsula. But what happened even more quickly and may seem even more unlikely was what each part of him did. Each part began to regenerate, and not just into a living *part* but into a living *whole.* Each part became an all-new Donald Storm, much in the same way that each part of a severed flatworm grows into a full new flatworm.

There was something very ominous about the times, a feeling of dread in every aspect of life -- personal, professional, urban, suburban -- that made what happened to Donald Storm seem not only possible, but even necessary. And so each part of him was all of him, and each new Donald Storm knew just what the old one knew, but with a crucial difference -- each had a memory gap, and each was driven to fill it, to find those events, perceptions, and feelings that might occupy not only the present becoming the future, but the past as well. Each had Donald's wallet, his savings account, his briefcase, and his carefully barbered appearance. But they did not want to work with statistics. In fact, they didn't even think of it. All

seven began a series of slow migrations, ending up where their feet decided they should.

One took up the study of dolphins, taking a job at Sea World in San Diego, where he tried to learn how dolphins thought and felt and how they talked. He loved to watch them jump in the air and smile. Another married a woman who'd been working out in gyms for seven years, had won the Ms. Apollo contest three straight times, and loved to watch him watch her flex her muscled arms in the mirror. A third one began a dictionary of words that had never existed, but which -- again because of the ominous tone of the times -- now became crucial, though still unknown. He tried to see -- not in each thing by itself, but in its connection with everything else -- a new word whose meaning could only be learned over time. Another Donald Storm set up a network of meditation centers in major cities, beginning in New York (where they were most needed) and spreading into Montreal, Detroit, New Orleans, and Bismark, North Dakota. Formerly unemployed men and women, whom Donald trained, personally, to simply provide a pleasant place for prayer and meditation, ran each center. Yet another Donald worked on a farm, where during his spare time he learned to become very silent, staring at the patient patterns of growth in wheat and corn, as if his eyes were gifted with time-lapse photographic perception. And then there was a Donald who worked as a barker at Riverview, Chicago's largest amusement park, and fell in love with the complexities of people's expressions coming away from the funhouse mirrors. A Donald in Duluth, Minnesota, developed a wristwatch that told the time according to the wearer's mood, such that for some people time went slower than for others, and he was so successful in marketing these watches that soon almost everyone in Duluth was operating in a separate time framework. A Donald in Butte, Montana, inheriting an old house from a woman who'd gone

Autumn Vignettes

Wendy Wees

Like Denis Tiani elsewhere in this volume, Wendy Wees is best known as an artist, her work gracing volumes from Tor Books, Ace Books, and Arbor House, as well as occasional and select small magazines such as Ghosts & Scholars *and* Fantasy Macabre.

Her occasional prose -- and we may hope there will be much more of it in the future -- has so far appeared exclusively in Fantasy & Terror. *Of these autumn vignettes, the first appeared in the third issue, in 1984. The second is reprinted from #10, 1987. Wendy lives in Seattle and works for a Japanese antique importer.*

I. Chocolate

There is a crack in her forehead. I pretend not to notice. For several weeks we take long walks ending in talks over cups of chocolate. I still make no mention of the crack, though it has split us further.

At the height of autumn, when we are at our favorite spot and I am chatting away about the blazing trees and the gray sky, fluid begins to drip slowly through the crack in her forehead. I instinctively brush aside my own hair. She does the same. The clear liquid transfers to hand and she wipes it on the crimson napkin. I am still too shy to ask of her condition. And, too, she smiles and I know she is not in pain.

We make plans to meet the next day at a textile shop, for she very much loves fibers -- and me. She says she wants to weave a wrap for me, with the

cold weather coming on and I a poor student in need of warmth. I am to choose the colors of the threads.

We meet the next day at the shop. I choose earth colors, autumn colors, browns and rusts, and ochre.

We return to her apartment. She fixes cups of hot chocolate with an added touch of cinnamon.

We sit on the loveseat together. Though we do not face each other, I do notice the ever-widening crack. It now has a constant runnel of sticky liquid pulsing from it down both sides of her nose. I am finally about to question her condition when a faintness conies over me. She stands up and lets me stretch out on the loveseat. I feel much relieved as the sensation passes. In the next moment I fall asleep, and it is at this time a dream takes place.

I am myself in the dream, but I am without arms and legs. And I am in a hospital bed, many stories up in a tiny shiny white-walled room. She is a nurse. We have wonderful conversations together over cups of chocolate, which she feeds me in the afternoons. I always smile when she comes to visit.

One night she lifts me from the hospital bed and carries me so gently through the darkening evening to her apartment. She places me on her loveseat and goes to prepare chocolate. While she is gone I look around the warm, earthy room. The floor is covered with a carpet of dry autumn leaves. There are layers of webs of gossamer threads in the corners of the room. In the middle stands a loom.

She returns with one cup of chocolate, which we share. She helps me sip. Afterward she stands and places me gently on my side.

I look up at her face and notice the crack. As it splits and widens, the fluid pulses. She places her hands to the opening and carefully pulls an unending, sticky variegated thread. As the thread is drawn forth, she gently winds it about me, and with continuous motion she wraps me in a warm thick cocoon.

I awaken and I awaken.

My eyes are open, but all is dark. There is something atop me and tucked under my sides. I struggle a bit and move my arms and legs. I pull the soft cover off my head and shoulders. I shut my eyes, for the light hurts them. I sit up. After a few moments I open my eyes. Across my lap is the most beautiful golden cloak with scattered threads of rust and browns. I hold it up to admire the unrepeating designs. I notice the long narrow slits at the back of the shoulder blades.

At that moment she enters the room with a tray of drinks and biscuits. She places it on the table by the side of the loveseat. As she does so, she asks me how I like her handiwork. I tell her I love it and am impressed. She smiles and sits next to me. While she hands me my cup I notice there is a glistening white scar in the middle of her forehead.

Over our cups of chocolate, we talk of an afternoon walk.

II. Mousewoman

I cannot explain to you how it came to be that I let her enter my life. It is just so: some come into one's life through open doors. Some come with open arms. Some come with closed fists. I receive all; embrace few.

I embraced Mousewoman. I believe it was her shiny silver whiskers, her slate gray eyes, and her eyes so empty.

And, too, it was autumn. The rains had started. The leaves had fallen, brown and wet; the air heavy with decay.

Mousewoman, so frail, a vagabond; crooked nose and tiny pointed chin. How dare she enter my life. She came and left only to return again and again. And always she came with open arms and I embraced her.

I loved Mousewoman, loved her dearly, though I never quite knew her. We slept away the quieter autumn nights together. Sometimes we lit candles. Sometimes we burned incense. There was warmth and comfort between us during those long nights.

But when winter came, on the longest nights of the years, she would disappear, scurrying down some dark path searching for what God only knows. To say she found something or someone would be a lie, for always months later she would be at my door. And we would embrace.

But there came a time when more than two autumns passed and Mousewoman did not show up at my door. This was my reclusive time. I locked my front door never to receive a friend or stranger. 1 would go down the cellar stairs and through the cellar door to make my connections with the outside world.

The last time I saw Mousewoman was in passing. I was going to buy chanterelles in the marketplace. They had been our favorite autumn meal. She, too, was in the market. She was visiting with the sachet lady oohing and aahing over the packets of rose and lavender.

We had a pleasant chat. She told me she could not afford chanterelles this season. Her arms and legs looked so fragile. She said she was as poor as a churchmouse. In fact, she was spending most of her time in the various Catholic churches throughout the city. She found the statues morbidly friendly. And she spent much of her time and all her money in the hosiery departments of large stores. She said she was obsessed with the appearances of feet; how everyone in the city lacked artistic credibility, and this could be judged by the total lack of concern for color and texture, from the knees down.

Of course I noted and complimented her on her fine foot attire. It was true. From her knees down she was truly an artist. That particular day she wore a beautiful pair of gray crocheted stockings atop black tights. The gray was patterned with leaves twining up her calves. Over these she wore lavender anklets with tiny embroidered cowboys. Possibly a bit gaudy, she had loosely woven pastel ribbons through the upper part of the crocheted socks. And to these ribbons she had sewn bells.

She was lovely. I wanted to hug her, to tell her all would be well. But I knew this to not be so. And I never lie. Mousewoman died quietly in the Church of St. Mary. I think of her from time to time. And sometimes, when I'm not writing or visiting with my new friends (I recently opened my front door), I go to Catholic Church and offer up a pair of crocheted anklets to her. And the plaster Mary looks down at me in a morbidly friendly way. And, too, she looks like my Mousewoman with tiny pointed chin, and on her feet she wears the printed polka dot socks I offered up many visits ago.

Mother Hag

Steve Rasnic Tent

Steve Rasnic Tern's first novel was Excavation from Avon Books, but Tern had long established a reputation even before his advent as a novelist, his short stories gracing major anthologies and numerous little magazines for over a decade. David Silva's Horror Show did a special Tent issue, which included a particularly nasty story about teeth. His bleak jewels -- both stories and poems -- have graced Gordon Linzner's Space & Time, Dr. Schiffs Whispers, Crispin Burnham's Eldritch Tales, the British Fantasy Society's Dark Horizons, Dennis Mallonee's Fantasy Book, Paul Ganley's Whispers, Fantasy Macabre, which I edit for Richard H. Fawcett, Publisher, and many more. "Mother Hag" is a prime example, taken from Peggy Nadramia's Grue.

Once there lived a sister and a brother with their father and stepmother on the edge of a great wood. Whenever either of them disobeyed, the stepmother would warn them, "Behave now, or Mother Hag will come and take you!" The she'd smile wickedly and add, "And she's your own true mother, but she's a bad one, and will eat you just the same. You should be thankful you've the likes of me and my husband to look after you."

And the small pair would frown and nod solemnly, and stop their playing or whatever else had been bothering the stepmother.

Mother Hag was a famous witch; everyone for miles around knew about her. The two children had memorized all the different descriptions they had heard of her, so that finally they were quite unable to imagine her face and figure, so contradictory the many versions of her seemed.

Mother Hag was described, depending on who you talked to, so tall she rose to the ceiling, so small she was quite invisible and treacherous; black, pale, or quite blue; covered with warts or scabs; wide as a barnyard, narrow as a crack; naked as the winter fields, cloaked in midnight; fingers of clay or fingers of red-iron; drinks blood, tar, or urine; has pointed or blunt teeth, clean-shaven or whiskers, sunken or bulging eyes, wrinkled or gigantic breasts, cracked or a haunting, deep voice.

But all agreed she was very, very wise.

Their father remained silent on the subject of Mother Hag, except once when he had told the brother that he first met Mother Hag when hunting in the dark wood near her castle. She'd captured him mere, and enchanted him somehow, forcing him to marry her. He could never remember how long he spent in her castle; the days seemed like years, but he was very old when he finally came out, escaping with the two young children in a wagonload of hay.

Their father could not remember ever spending any time with his children when they all lived in the castle, so he didn't really feel like a parent to them at all. That was all he would say on the subject. He stayed quiet and to himself, and let their stepmother handle things. After a time the children felt nothing for him.

The stepmother worked the children long and hard. But the children did not complain-, for they knew someday Mother Hay would indeed come and take them away, and they had their own ideas about what their real and only true mother was like.

The brother always pictured a jolly old fat woman, whose face was beautiful just the same. He vaguely remembered a childhood full of mischief, and how his true mother had scolded him each time, but always hugged him deep into her soft, pillowy flesh afterward. She always had advice to give, and games and songs. She was very wise.

The sister knew her true mother had been tall, and broad-shouldered, stronger than any man. Her mother helped her to excel in sports even at

such a young age. She taught her to be independent and self-reliant. Her true toother was very wise.

The children's seemingly easy compliance only made the stepmother even stricter. They weren't allowed out to play. They had to spin wool and scrub floors, mend pots and dig mud for bricks. When either was seen to talk to the other, they were separated, as the stepmother had soon realized their true feelings about Mother Hag.

"She'll get you, I tell you!" the stepmother scolded. "Your own true mother or not. She'll grind you into little pieces and devour you with her tea! I wouldn't be running off from this house if I were you."

But the brother and sister only nodded solemnly, without reply, and secretly dreamed their beautiful dream of their true mother.

One day a peddler came to the cottage with his bag full of goods. "Pots, pans, ointments, perhaps a bit of ribbon, madam?" he asked pleasantly when the stepmother answered the door. She slammed the door in his face. The peddler sat down on the front step and began to cry.

The two children were returning from the fields, their arms and legs and faces quite black with the mud, when they saw this happening, and rushed to console the poor peddler without another thought.

"Oh, you poor man," the sister said. "You should break down the door and kick her!" She spat with a fierce gleam in her eye.

"Oh, you poor man," the brother said. "Never a kind word for such a hard-working peddler!"

The peddler stopped his crying and looked up. "And who might you two be? Children of the wicked woman I suppose, poor things."

The children moved together and held hands. "Mother Hag is our true mother!" they both said proudly.

"The witch!" the peddler cried in surprise.

"A very kind, large woman," the boy said.

"And strong and brave," the girl said.

"Oh, certainly!" replied the peddler. "She's also very wise. Why, everyone goes to Mother Hag for advice! As a matter of fact, Mother Hag seat me into this region to look for her lost children. All the peddlers hereabouts work for her. But I must admit you seem nothing as she described."

"Why not!" they exclaimed.

"You're so much darker."

"But it's the mud from the fields and from working so hard out in the sun," the girl said.

"Why that must be it!" the peddler said, and laughed.

"Will you take us to see her?" the boy asked.

"Won't that wicked woman complain and make a loud noise?" The peddler looked doubtful.

"Oh, please!" cried the girl. "You could hide us in your sack. We don't take up very much room."

The peddler smiled. "Why, that just might work." He opened the large sack. The two children looked in; it seemed an enormous cave in there, impossibly dark. They couldn't even see the peddler's pots, pans, and ribbons; it was so spacious and dark.

But the children mustered their courage and looked about them in apprehension. Their father and stepmother were nowhere to be seen. They looked at each other quickly, and jumped into the sack together.

Their long, echoing shouts as they drifted deep into the dark interior of the sack brought a smile to the peddler's lips. "Useful, this sack of Mother Hag's." He chuckled softly to himself, and shouldered the large sack and started on his way again.

The brother and sister remembered little about the time they spent in the great, dark sack. They saw many things there, but most of these were all mixed-up and confusing. The brother remembered a great dark wood where he wandered lost for days. The sister was convinced she had borne children and grown old there. They both recalled memories of their early lives with Mother Hag: her strict discipline, her warm embraces, her beauty, and her strength. They could have been in the sack a long time or a short time. They were never quite sure.

Finally the peddler stopped and dropped the sack from around their bodies. They opened their eyes and looked down at the folds of the sack lying about their feet: it seemed to have shrunk on their journey, and all the peddler's goods had disappeared; they seemed to have been all the sack contained. Then they looked around them.

Mother Hag's castle seemed to grow right out of the side of the hill like some great stained and gnarled tooth. Old tree trunks twisted in and out of holes in the stone speckled with the hardened drips of mortar used to patch those holes. The roof of the castle was formed from century-old trees whose branches hung down and were so interwoven as to make a solid roof. Although narrow, the castle was long; its crooked chimneys could be seen poking up through the hill from the underground rooms as far as the children could see. A steady line of peddlers with bulging sacks was entering a door on the left side of the castle. Another line exited from a door on the right, their sacks quite empty.

"Those sacks are squirming!" the sister cried. "Just small animals for Mother Hag's dinner," the peddler said with a smile..

Still another line entered the front gate of the castle. All different kinds of people made up this line: peasants, merchants, old women, youths, even some professional people such as doctors, lawyers, and city officials in their various costumes of office.

"They seek advice," the peddler said. "As you know, Mother Hag is very wise."

The brother could overhear some of the conversation from this line: Her brother has tormented me for years... the crops are failing... one of Mother's love charms and she'll be mine... twice I warned her, twice! Now she'll see... this gold will bring me another ten years I'm sure... and many other things.

"When do we see our mother?" the sister asked. But the peddler swiftly stuffed them back into his pack and joined the line of peddlers with full sacks; his own wiggling and squirming like the others.

The children must have fallen asleep then for the next thing they remembered was someone opening the sack in the darkness and lifting their tired bodies up and putting them to bed.

The brother tried to see who it was, but the face was a gray oval in the dim light of the castle. Then he fell asleep once more.

A beautiful woman with golden hair stood over the two, gently rustling the covers to awaken them. The sister was the first to awaken and gasped, "Mother!" for the woman had strong arms and sharp features, and appeared terribly tall to the little girl.

When the boy opened his eyes he, too, gasped, "Mother!" as the woman before him appeared quite plump, but had the loveliest face he had ever seen.

They both hugged her fiercely.

"Oh, thank you my children. I'd love to have been your mother, but Mother Hag is your own true mother. I am just her maid."

"Then... you're not Mother Hag?" the sister asked sleepily.

- At that the beautiful woman bellowed with a laughter that seemed to the children much too large for her. She stopped as suddenly and smiled. "Mother Hag is much larger than I, children. Almost a giant. And she dresses all in black and gray and shades mere mortals are not even capable of seeing. She's sent me to bring you to her; she's missed her true children for much too long a time."

Then the beautiful woman took them to a large circular chamber, which looked to be seamless, and left them on a small scarlet rug in the middle of it. She left swiftly through a small door at the back.

The children looked around them, thinking they must be far underground since so tall a chamber could not have fit in that portion of Mother Hag's castle they had first seen. The brother gazed up at the far away ceiling and for a moment thought he saw an entire landscape suspended there, with people pulling carts and women dancing by a pond, but when he blinked it was gone.

Then Mother Hag walked into the chamber, through the same door the beautiful woman had just left. -

"Oh, she's small," the sister said. And indeed she was, a tiny dark figure standing by the distant doorway. Like an ant, or a cockroach.

"No, no, she's big... enormous... gargantuan!" the brother exclaimed. And she was this, too, for with every step forward she loomed larger, until standing before the little red rug she dwarfed them both, her great blue nose scratching at the ceiling, her bright yellow wooden legs thick as tree trunks, her dress so large and billowy, so pitch-black the children thought for just a second they had suddenly awakened from a dream, and they were peering into the black chamber around their beds.

Children, she whispered, but a whisper so thunderous they both fell to their knees.

My own true children... come to Mother Hag....

And they did. The brother leaping merrily, the sister dancing, both running with arms wide into the deep black of her dress. And both tumbling head over heels as they spun dizzily into the dark.

They awoke inside one of Mother Hag's great pockets, with hundreds of other children.

"Who are you?" the brother asked a tall girl with hair red as cherries.

"I'm Mother Hag's daughter," she piped.

"And you?" the sister asked a small boy with bangs covering one eye.

"I'm her son..." he mumbled.

And there were many more, more than they could count resting in every nook and cranny of the great pocket, all different sizes, shapes, and colors. And all claiming to be a son or daughter of Mother Hag.

There was something about their stories, which made the brother and sister believe them.

The children spent years with Mother Hag. How many, they could not even guess, because there were no clocks or calendars in Mother Hag's castle, and night and day occurred only when she decided they must. Old children disappeared and new children arrived all the time, so after a while the brother and sister stopped trying to remember all the names. Many of the children came with the peddlers, but milkmen with the morning dairy goods delivered some, and others simply appeared in a bed one morning. The older children simply vanished. Only the very old ones, the ones with white hair and wrinkled skin, were seen to leave through the doors. It didn't take the children very long to discover that their own father had been one of Mother Hag's original children.

"I knew him then," the beautiful maid told them one night while tucking them both into bed. "He had eyes like yours," she told the brother. "And hair like yours," she told the sister.

"But how could you have known him?" the sister asked. "You're so young!"

But she only laughed, that deep, loud, haunting laugh, cut short with a smile.

Over the years the children discovered that many people came to Mother Hag for help, more than they could hope to count. They found that she had many magical powers; in fact, she seemed to be able to do most anything she wanted.

She could make herself invisible and move furniture all about. She could sour milk with just a glance. Make her angry and it rained on you, even in the castle. Make her sad and she might turn you into a bird.

Once the brother saw her blasting distant trees with a gesture of her little finger. Once the sister witnessed chairs dancing all about her.

And once both of the children followed the beautiful maid into her chamber. They shivered behind a table as she took off her clothes, her face, her beautiful, soft skin, and what was left was so hideous they were actually happy to see her don Mother Hag's midnight robes, blue nose, and bright yellow wooden legs so they wouldn't have to see that awful thing anymore. Then Mother Hag smiled, and cackled that low, haunting growl of a laugh, and the children somehow knew she had meant for them to see her as she really was.

But what frightened the children most about Mother Hag was the way she seemed to always know what they were thinking, where they had been, and when they were up to any kind of mischief. Mother Hag was their own true mother indeed.

Sometimes she was hateful to them and burned their small toes with fire from her eyes. Other times she held them close and made them safe within her enormous self. But all the same she was always their mother.

But still they had resentments. After giving birth to them, why had she pushed them away? Why did she frustrate their desires so? They wondered if she noticed this resentment in them, as after a while they began seeing less and less of her about the castle. It was rumored among the servants that she had retired to an old wing at the back, deep under the hill.

Finally the brother and sister woke up one morning and discovered they were old, much older than anyone they'd ever known, much older than they ever could have imagined. And then they knew they were her favorites, that she was indeed their one true mother and they her only true children, since no one else was left in the castle. And yet they themselves had not been asked to leave.

They wandered through the castle for days, until finally they found the last great chamber where Mother Hag now lived. When they opened the door they saw her leaning wearily against the far wall, slumped and crumpled, her great wooden legs spread apart, her dress blacker than any night humankind had known, and her body bloated twice as large as ever before.

The brother leaped into the air joyfully, and found himself thinking like a child again, wanting terribly to be hugged by Mother Hag, to be enveloped by her dark bosom until the world was shut completely from view, and suddenly tired, he made the one last run into her embrace, slipping on the polished chamber floor, slipping, slipping so quickly that before he knew it he had rolled completely under the edge of her black skirt, as if the night itself had slipped him away into sleep.

A broad smile grew slowly across the sister's face as the enormous teeth hidden beneath Mother Hag's dress began to gnaw and strip the flesh from her brother's body, slipping him even further into endless night.

Once there lived a brother who is no more. Once there lived a great and mysterious witch named Mother Hag. But now there is a new Mother Hag. The new Mother Hag is younger, but they say when she dons the midnight dress and the wooden legs and the blue nose she rises almost to the ceiling, her dress filling the cold air until she's the largest woman anyone can remember seeing.

And when she laughs her cold, haunting laugh no more smiles. But still they journey far and wide for advice.

Good Thoughts

W. Paul Ganley

W. Paul Ganley is best known as the publisher of Weirdbook, *the longest running small press horror and fantasy magazine currently going. He also publishes hardcovers and trade paperbacks, including volumes by Brian Lumley, J. N. Wi-liamson, Darrell Schweitzer, and myself, always handsomely illustrated, often by Steve Fabian. One of the finest horror stories of the decade, Michael Bishop's "Beyond the Walls of Tyre," appeared first in* Weirdbook *after being rejected elsewhere (it has since proven itself a classic). Paul's own weird poetry and short stories, all too rare, have appeared in Joseph Payne Brennan's* Macabre, *Meade Frierson's* HPL Tribute, *August Derleth's* Arkham Collector, *Fred C. Adams'* Spoor, *C. C. Clingan's* The Diversifier, *plus* Eldritch Tales, Space & Time, *and several others. "Good Thoughts," an understated little shocker, appeared in the late Dale C. Donaldson's* Moonbroth.

Reni lay by the roadside and groaned. Her scrawny body ached everywhere they had struck her, but still she knew she had been lucky. This time they had only hurt her a little. They had not raped her, as they had done some weeks earlier.

Tank, the short bloated one, had started to unbuckle his trousers when Willi, leader of the wolf pack, had laughed sarcastically and clapped him on the shoulder.

"We can get better than that scroungy stuff," he said. "Knock it off, stupid." And the gang had gone tearing along the deserted farm road toward town.

No one paid them much attention because they were clever.

If they molested a girl it was one who belonged to no powerful family, but one like Reni who was all alone in the world. If they beat and kicked a

drunk for the sheer fun of it, it was a vagrant whose death, if it happened, would not be important.

That other time Reni had almost died. Fourteen, very young and thin for her age, nothing had ever prepared her for what the wolf pack had done to her. Seven young men they were, from wealthy families who would back them against most of the trouble that might ensue. She hated them.

Old Kato had found her by the roadside. Even the wolf pack avoided Kano, though he had no apparent influence or power. He was a strange man, a man who lived away from the village in an old cabin he had himself built. It was whispered that he had mastered a demon that kept him clothed and fed, and no one dared to take a chance of crossing his path.

Kano had found her, taken her up, and carried her to his hut where he had covered her entire bruised body with a healing salve. He had done this without a flicker of expression on neither his aged face, nor a hint of sexual desire in his look or his touch. She was grateful most of all for that, and she rested.

After she had recovered she had come to see him nearly every day. His voice and manner were friendly and soothing, and he had obviously taken a liking to the friendless waif... he who had no friends himself.

Scarcely five weeks after he had rescued her, he told Reni that she might never see him again. Her face fell, and she knew that tears were coming into her eyes.

"I am dying, my dear one, and must first undertake a long journey," she heard him say quietly.

"No... No!" was all she could reply.

"I may not die in this place."

He removed an amulet from around his neck and placed it over her head. It looked like an ordinary black stone, a jagged chunk of anthracite, threaded

with a most common piece of cotton twine. He pushed the stone down under her ragged blouse.

"I have long wished to pass on this magic stone to a deserving person," he said formally, "but never have I found one who could carry its burden. Now I have decided it shall be yours."

She thanked him, although tears still dimmed her eyes.

"Perhaps you should not thank me for it," said he. "It is a dangerous gift. You must be careful to think only good thoughts when you wear it. It can bring you and others much good fortune, but you-must force good thoughts into your mind when you wear it."

His voice had lowered, and she was not certain, but she thought he added, "... as I have not been able to do for a long time."

The words of admonition came back to Reni now as-she lay in the dust, the hot sun baking her tears into dried streaks of salt. She looked about her. Willi had torn the amulet from about her throat, leaving a narrow line of blood to mark her neck, and had glanced scornfully at the lump of black rock.

"Worthless junk," he said disgustedly, tossing it to the side of the road.

Had he supposed she would be wearing a diamond? That was what she was thinking, bitterly, as she hunted in the dust at the roadside for her precious amulet. When she found it, she clasped it hard in her left hand and ran home.

Home, for Reni, was a tiny cubicle in the Village Inn, a restaurant and hotel for wayfarers, located at the extreme edge of the village. She worked as a maid and a dishwasher, and in return was fed scraps from the tables and given a tiny bed to sleep in. Her father had once owned the Inn, but he had lost it and killed himself after her mother had died.

Reni threaded the black lump with another piece of string; unraveled from the coarse fabric she wore, and cleaned herself. A small drop of her blood

dripped unnoticed on the amulet and slowly dried there. All of the rest of the day she went about her work, ate her bread crusts and gravy at dinner, and crawled into her tiny cot to sleep.

She hurt all over and she hated all over. Think good thoughts? Reni hated, and she held the amulet in her warm palm as she did. Its warm feel comforted her, and she slept. Outside, a big yellow moon rose. The wolf pack hunted for excitement, more dangerous than would have been a pack of real wolves. A slight breeze grew, cooling the air a little.

At midnight the door of Reni's little room rattled. The room had once been a storage closet, and looked out on a back alley. Reni still slept, dreaming of hate. Outside the door Tank and Rob worked at breaking open the old lock. Both were drunk and neither had found himself a girl, willing or unwilling. It had been a bad night. The others of the gang were taken care of, but not Tank and Rob. Then Tank, in a fierce moment of sodden inspiration, had remembered Reni.

"She's better than nothing," he had muttered to Rob, and the two of them were off to the Inn.

The door was old and the lock was worn, and the two young men were strong. They pried it open and pushed the door inward. The tiny room was dark. They heard heavy breathing.

"Use your torch," Rob whispered, and Tank flicked on his small penlight. He directed it at the bed.

He sucked in his breath violently. His hand shook. The light danced on the walls, flickering momentarily over the large form that was crouched on the ancient cot. Then the thing sprang. Tank's last breath ended in a croak and a gurgle.

Rob turned to run, finding his voice in a high feminine scream. Then the beast was on him, tearing and growling, and soon he, too, ceased to move.

The demon crouched, snarling, above the figure of its victim. Its mighty jaws ripped open the belly and dug for the liver, which it gulped quickly.

Then- slinking, it moved away toward the other end of the town where the five other members of the so-called wolf pack were ending their revels.

Snug in her bed, Reni slept peacefully, her hand clutching the amulet.

She dreamed of hate.

Shirley Is No Longer with Us

Jody Scott

In the seventies, before feminism was integrated (some would say say co-opted) into the mainstream of things, there were a number of feminist magazines for fantasy and science fiction readers, including Jennifer Bankier's The Witch and the Chameleon *(really the classic of the type), my own* Windhaven *(subtitled "a matriarchal fanzine"), and* Janus, *which is the only one still published (under its new title* Aurora) *from the Madison, Wisconsin, science fiction society. The present story appeared in* Windhaven #3 *in 1978.*

Jody Scott was editor of a California literary magazine that counted among its contributors Anai's Nin and Henry Miller. More recently she has risen to fame and glory as author of Passing for Human *and the lesbian cult classic* I, Vampire, *available in America from Ace Books and in England from The Women's Press. Her short stories have appeared chiefly in major magazines and anthologies, but pushover that she is, she is easily cajoled into contributing to piddly non-profit thingies, which is how come "“ Shirley" came to appear only in* Windhaven.

All she'd wanted to do was dash into Bloomingdale's for ten minutes during lunch hour and grab up a couple of Olga brassieres in tan tricot polyester, the ones with seamless cups for a totally natural look under all her clothes, advertised "for the woman with a fuller figure," in size 36 with a C cup. She didn't even need to try the bras on since she'd been wearing the same model for a year now. They had the no-stretch straps. She hated elastic in the straps. If you were a bit larger than average, the elastic made your breasts jounce when you ran. The Olgas cost six bucks apiece but they were worth it because they made you look and feel good. And now *this* had to happen!

She couldn't get out of the Goddamned revolving door! It seemed to be stuck, but she wasn't panicky, because several people had seen it happen. She juggled the parcel containing the tuna fish sandwich and tangerine which were her lunch, which she meant to eat at the office, and should have left in the desk, but didn't, because everything you left there got stolen (people were creeps!), and she tried not to get hysterical, thinking that the men would be sure to call the manager who'd turn the machinery off, or whatever needed doing.

She'd gone around twice already. Darn! She might have jumped out when the door opened onto the street side, but she needed those bras because the ones she had were beginning to sag and look tacky from machine washing and hot-air drying, and every time the section of the door in which she seemed to be stuck opened onto the store side, the lousy thing was going so fast she couldn't possibly leap to safety. Damn! She had to get back. She was just starting out. She was taking courses at night. She was going to be a legal secretary. She had to hurry. She didn't have time for this. People were gathering, too, both inside the store and on the street side, to watch what was happening, and that was good because it meant help would soon be on the way. She could hear bits of conversation:

"Can't somebody do something?"

"They already called the city."

"Do something, somebody! Hurry!"

People always said that accidents occur in a flash, so fast you don't know what happened, and it was true of the way she'd got stuck in this door: one minute rushing busily to do tome essential shopping and the next instant trapped, unable to rest, nudged by the door behind if she lagged for so much a fraction of a second, and no way of getting out or slowing the thing down. Peculiar that she could think it out this, almost calmly, with one part of her mind, while at same time she knew she was screaming hysterically and ting herself, and had dropped the bag containing the tuna fish sandwich and tangerine and was trampling them in the muck underfoot. She could hear voices.

"Do something, you people! Don't just stand gaping!" "Don't blame me. It's a power lock." "Somebody call the fire department!" Running in a tight circle, she was too exhausted to go on shrieking, and now felt extremely light-headed, as if she'd drunk about five martinis. Maybe she *had* drunk five martinis and this was some kind of terrible dream or nightmare from which she'd awaken, in safety, in a few minutes, in her own bed at home. It was strange how all in one flash this revolving door had become her whole life and getting out of it was all that mattered. Well, it couldn't take much longer. She just had to remain calm. The men were working on it. She heard them say,

"Jam a two-by-four in there."

"You crazy? You'll kill the lady. Call the fire department." "Well, I've got to get home. Call me if anything happens." "She's fainting. Please hurry." "Some kinda publicity stunt."

"Slow down," they kept yelling, but the door was much too heavy for any effort she might make. This icy lightness, this dream snow that washed over her, must be shock. Her feet were in agony from pounding the hard floor. She could look down and see little diamonds of mica shining in the cement and a dark path going around and around, about six inches out from the center part of the revolving door, where her sandwich and tangerine had been mashed to dirty pulp. The door itself, she noticed, or rather all four doors, were made of lacquered mahogany inset with thick plate glass. She hung onto that rod for dear life, vowing not to panic again and make a damn fool of herself in front of all these people. It would surely not be more than a few seconds longer; help was on the way. The people were standing, shuffling, and milling, most of them gaping, some screaming in horror when they first caught sight of her, and several wore broad grins. A few were laughing. Well, could you blame them? She'd probably laugh, too, if she saw some poor dummy in this embarrassing situation. The plate glass, she noted, was deeply inset into the shiny wood of the frame. Could she possibly jump up and manage to put a foot on the ledge of the door in the front? Then she could get the other foot up, and stand on her toes on the two ledges, hanging tightly on the brass rods on either door. She knew she was crying like an absolute fool in front of everybody but she also knew she *had*

to get up off the ground in a hurry because very soon she'd faint, and the door would crush or mash her, it would mutilate her, just like it mashed the food on the floor all mixed with muddy urine, the mud black because it was still raining out, and she was going to faint. The door would crush her as it swept her crumpled body around and around. Racing the clock, she gathered every ounce of strength and tried to put one toe onto the ledge in front but stumbled and almost fell, banging her head on the glass. She tried it again; her foot slipped off again. This must look funny because people were laughing, although others were shouting angrily.

"Hurry! Do something!"

"Stand back, you're using up all the air."

"The poor girl will die."

"Excuse me, do you have the time?"

"Is it a man or a woman?"

"Hurry."

She was sobbing uncontrollably, no longer caring what people thought. Did she dare try getting a toehold on the ledge again? She *had* to do it. Feeling that it was someone else trapped in this revolving door while she herself stood outside and watched, she finally put a toe up on the ledge, which turned out to be nearly half an inch wide, and grabbing the brass rod tightly, she reached for the brass rod in the rear and at the same time managed to get the other toe up on the rear ledge.

"Who is she?"

"Don't just stand watching! *Do* something!"

There she hung, mouth open, eyes closed, clinging like a sloth, or a bat on tiptoe. After the exertion she felt limp and extremely dizzy and suddenly had to throw up. This happened much too fast for her to be able to prepare for it, but at least she managed to do it over one shoulder so most of it

landed on the floor where it was soon mashed fiat into the filth already there. The onlookers, pale blurred faces now, seemed disgusted with what she had done. Slowly she turned her right foot sideways on the ledge behind her. That was better. Much better. The outside edge of each shoe was wedged against a ledge, and each hand clung to one of the brass rods as she whirled around and around. She seemed to be getting out of her body, as it hung propped in that position, and was looking down on the scene, which was ridiculous in the extreme. She only hoped her hands would remain locked in that clenched position because most of the sensation was gone from them, and she was afraid they would relax their grip, especially if she went unconscious, and send her bouncing to the ground like a sack of potatoes -- then she'd never be able to stand up again! But a lucky thing happened. She found it was possible to jam each hand under one of the rods, tightly, and now she could pass out at any time without fear of falling. Her own sobs and the pneumatic whooshing of the door were all she heard as with eyes clenched against the horror, she tried vainly to get a few second's rest.

It was dark out. Most of the people had gone home. A crew worked frantically. For a while, men were crawling all over the walls and ceiling. After several hours another crew replaced them; eventually it was light out again. She heard somebody say,

"Is she dead?"

"Must be, by now. Propped up in there."

"Well, no rush then."

She couldn't see the firemen, or whoever they were, very clearly in the blue murk. They showed only as blobs of faces against dark clothing, ever shifting and changing. Sometimes the street was filled with barely moving traffic but other times it looked empty as an abandoned stage set, except for the crews who worked tirelessly. From her glass cage could be glimpsed a whirlpool of lights going on and off, traffic signals turning red, green, red, green, red. Sometimes a bus crept past. Once a TV truck pulled up at the curb and took pictures of her in the gyrating prison. Sometimes she went into a dreamlike state, a swirly, gulfy trance in which she was a bud that

ripened and uncoiled into a flower and then jerked awake, spinning in blue murk.

It seemed the workmen couldn't stop the revolving door in its whirlwindy pivoting and unless this was another nightmare, a month later her flesh had shrunken and turned black from constant exposure to the elements. Each time her section of door reached the street side there was a gust of rain, or blazing sun, or crumpled papers and filth would blow in, but inside the store it was always comfortably warm and dry. The following year they put up a plaque, and there was a ceremony with crowds, popping flashbulbs, speeches, and applause.

For her? Could this be an award, were they making this revolving door into a public monument? She hardly dared hope. By now only a whirling mummy, still, she managed to glimpse a word here and there on the handsomely engraved plaque until she had the legend all pieced together. It said:

In honor of "Shirley," the unknown heroine whose stoic death is an example to us all.

She felt flattered and pleased. Well that was darned nice of them. They didn't have to do that. And she'd thought people were too selfish to notice her. But a nice plaque like this, a gesture of concern and real caring, well, it kind of restores your faith in human nature, now, doesn't it?

The Ghost of Don Carlos

Michel Tremblay

> *Canada has far more grant support for the small press than does the United States, resulting in an extremely active community of publishers. Most of the good ones publish fantasy from time to time; a few do it a great deal. Sono Nis's big star is Michael Bullock, surrealist and macabre short-story artist* par excellence. *House of Anansi has published Jacques Perron's* Selected Tales *and Matt Cohen's* Columbus and the Fat Lady and Other Stories. *And Intermedia Press in Vancouver, B.C., is responsible for Michel Tremblay's* Stories for Late Night Drinkers, *admirably translated into English by Michael Bullock.*
>
> *Tremblay is Quebec's best-known fantasist, though better known elsewhere in the world as a playwrite. His stories have been compared to Poe and Lovecraft. What follows is a scary, scary tale.*

My Uncle Ivan was famous. Everyone knew him, but no one ever talked about him in public. My Uncle Ivan was a spiritualist. People said he was able to communicate with the souls of the dead, thanks to a gift that some Hindu princess had once given him. In fact, my uncle really did possess this gift. In my childhood -- my uncle disappeared when I was barely fifteen -- I was present at some very extraordinary stances.

Having lost my parents when I was very young, I was taken in, taught about life and cherished by my Uncle Ivan. In spite of all the horrors told about him -- for example, that he was a man who respected neither law nor religion -- my Uncle Ivan was an admirable man in every way.

A very learned man, he was the best teacher imaginable. He was able to explain the most complicated things in a very simple, very clear manner, which enabled me, with the intelligence and few talents God had given me, to make pretty rapid progress in every area and, above all, in the field of science.

My uncle always refused to talk to me about his gift. When I broached the subject he got angry (his angers were terrible) and told me that he would never, absolutely never disclose his secrets to me. I can still hear him shout: "You want to become a medium, like me? Poor, poor child, you don't know what awaits you. You will never become a medium. I shall always refuse to pass on my gift to you, because that's what you want, isn't it? I love you far too much. I love you far too much."

Every Friday evening -- why Friday I don't know -- *a* group of six to a dozen people would invade the parlor of our house and my uncle would invoke the spirits. I have seen truly tragic things happen during these extraordinary séances. I have seen women faint when they saw their husband, their son, or their mother appear before them. I have seen otherwise very brave men get up and leave the house uttering groans of terror because someone, a dead person from the other world, had touched them. I have even seen a woman in tears passionately embrace the image of her deceased husband. But the most frightening, the most terrible and terrifying thing I ever saw in that accursed parlor was the ghost of Don Carlos.

One day Isabella del Mancio, one of the richest and, it was said, one of the most beautiful women in Spain, came to visit our little country. Polished gentleman that he was, our Prime Minister had prepared a splendid dinner in honor of this noble lady. Unfortunately for him, my Uncle Ivan was invited to the banquet. My Uncle Ivan, despite the fact that he was, as I have said, an admirable man was not at all sociable. He really wasn't made to live in society. His reputation for being unsociable was well founded. My uncle preferred the company of his books and, I can say so without false modesty, my company to that of those "intolerable aristocrats," as he used to call them. Therefore, he was not at all pleased to receive the Prime

Minister's invitation. "You ought to feel flattered," I told him, "that a prime minister invites you to dine in the company of the most beautiful woman in Spain." My Uncle Ivan smiled and said gently: "The most beautiful woman in Spain, my boy, is not Isabella del Mancio. The most beautiful woman in Spain..." My uncle closed his eyes and said in a low voice: "I will show her to you one day."

My Uncle Ivan declined the invitation, pleading a severe migraine.

But Isabella del Mancio was crazy about spiritualism. She had heard of my Uncle Ivan and was absolutely determined to make his acquaintance. When she saw that my uncle was not present at the banquet given in her honor she was very annoyed.

Immediately after dinner she demanded that the "sick man" should be sent for. "I have traveled thousands of miles to meet this medium" (here the Prime Minister was somewhat offended); "I finally get to this miserable country and I'm told this gentleman doesn't want to see me on the pretext that he has a severe migraine. Don't people know how to live in this country?"

My Uncle Ivan refused categorically to come to the Prime Minister's house. However, he agreed to invite Isabella del Mancio to the spiritualist séance the following Friday. That evening, before going to bed, my Uncle Ivan made a strange remark. "I hope," he said, "this Isabella del Mancio doesn't know about the ghost of Don Carlos."

The first thing Isabella del Mancio talked about the following Friday was the ghost of Don Carlos.

My uncle paled and his cheek muscles quivered, in him always a sign of intense nervousness. Isabella del Mancio noticed it. This ghost must be very terrible to make my Uncle Ivan turn pale! But I shall try to report as

faithfully as possible the conversation that then took place between Isabella del Mancio and my uncle.

"I see," she said, "that Don Carlos' reputation is well established. All the mediums seem to know him and all of them refuse to have dealings with him. But I dare hope that you, who are perhaps the most..."

"I beg you, madam," cut in my uncle, "not to ask me..."

"But Don Carlos can't be so terrible."

"Yes, madam, he is."

"How can you know? Have you seen him?"

"I have seen him. And even if I had not seen him I should still refuse to contact him. The name of Don Carlos is taboo in the domain of spiritualism. One can only make him appear once and... As you said just now, all the mediums know him, but none will have anything to do with him."

"Then how is it that you have seen him?"

"That would be too long a story to tell. Besides, I prefer to forget it. Or at least, I should like to try. Because you cannot forget Don Carlos when you have seen him, even if it was only once in your life."

"Tell me what he is like, at least."

"I beg you, madam, if you continue to ask questions I shall get annoyed."

Isabella let the matter drop. The séance began and was not a great success. Isabella del Mancio had taken part in an incredible number of stances of this sort and nothing could interest her anymore, nothing except the ghost of Don Carlos. My Uncle Ivan could see this clearly and seemed to be prey to great anxiety during the whole evening. The séance ended with the appearance of the soul of Isabella's father. But Isabella didn't even speak to her father; she had seen him so many times since his death that she had nothing more to say to him.

Before the guests left, I saw my uncle go up to the Spanish woman and ask her something. Large beads of sweat were running down his forehead and his voice was weak.

Isabella smiled and came and sat next to me, on a big divan close to the fireplace. "Your uncle seems very much on edge," she said to me teasingly. I felt that something horrible was going to happen because of this woman. That was when I began to hate her.

When everyone had left, my Uncle Ivan joined us on the divan. He took the hands of the beautiful Spanish woman between his own. "I can show the ghost of Don Carlos, if you wish," he said. "I am old now and spiritualism is beginning to bore me. You see, Don Carlos' ghost is the last thing a medium can call up. When he receives his gift, the medium undertakes to communicate with this ghost once in his life, and he is obliged to keep his promise. Afterward, everything is finished for him."

I thought at that moment that a medium lost his gift when he called up Don Carlos' ghost.... Oh, if I had only known! If I had only known!

"My career is drawing to a close," continued my uncle, "and I have decided this evening to crown it by calling up the ghost of Don Carlos. I have insisted on doing it in secret, because you cannot show Don Carlos' ghost to just anyone. You have to have tremendously strong nerves. If you wish to see Don Carlos, you shall see him. But I warn you: what you see will be terrifying." And Isabella burst out laughing. "Nothing can frighten me," she said. "Not even the devil in person!"

I tried to dissuade my uncle from carrying out his plan, but in vain. It was no use my telling him it would be a pity to lose his gift on account of a rather too beautiful Spanish woman who wouldn't even thank him. Nothing had any effect. "The time has come for me to call up Don Carlos," he replied.

Isabella del Mancio seemed very happy, at the prospect of being able at last to contemplate the famous ghost of Don Carlos. What did the price of this apparition matter to her? "I've been hearing about him for so long." And a smile flitted across her sensual lips. "They say he's very handsome."

"No," cried my Uncle Ivan, "Don Carlos is not handsome!"

My Uncle Ivan told me to put out all the lights in the house and close all the doors and windows. We lived in an enormous house by the sea, a big isolated house that might have been three or four hundred years old. "When you come back to the parlor," he said, "shut the door behind you, put out all the lights except the one above the round table, and hide in the darkest corner of the room. Whatever you do, don't show yourself. Under no circumstances, understand? Under no circumstances!!"

When I came back to the parlor, my Uncle Ivan was standing in the middle of the room looking at the huge mirror hanging above the fireplace. "That's the way Don Carlos will come," he said at last.

Isabella started to laugh (all that woman could do was laugh!) and declared that she absolutely must buy the mirror when it was all over. "I want to take Don Carlos away with me," she declared. My uncle looked at her severely. "When you have seen Don Carlos," he said, "you certainly won't want to take him away with you."

I hid behind a curtain, in a very dark corner of the room, while my Uncle Ivan and Isabella sat down at the round table. "Before we begin," whispered my uncle, "I must warn you of one thing. Don Carlos must not know that we are here. Don Carlos must not see us. When you see him, don't make a sound. Above all, don't speak."

"What a pity," exclaimed Isabella throwing back her head. "When I wanted to seduce your ghost."

How I hated that woman. How I hated her.

My uncle spread out his hands on the round table and told the Spanish woman to join her fingers to his. Then he uttered some words that I didn't understand and that Isabella seemed to find very funny. I saw her laughing as she watched my uncle recite his incantations. If I had been able at that

moment to foresee what was going to happen, I should have killed Isabella del Mancio and I should have saved my Uncle Ivan.

To begin with, all I heard was a slight, almost imperceptible sound that seemed to come from above the fireplace. My Uncle Ivan leaned toward Isabella and whispered: "Don't look at the mirror immediately. I shall tell you when you can look." Isabella turned away her head, but I continued to look in the direction of the mirror. The same low sound was repeated several times over and a soft orange light suddenly lit up the mirror. My uncle continued to mumble incoherent words. He did not look in the direction of the mirror either. But I looked.

Suddenly my Uncle Ivan jumped up and threw himself on me like a madman. "Don't look at the mirror," he cried. "Don't look at the mirror. He might kill you. Don Carlos might kill you."

At the same instant, a terrifying noise filled the room and the mirror was smashed in pieces. A violent gust of wind lifted the curtains while a piercing whistle rent my ears. "Disaster," cried my Uncle Ivan. "The mirror is broken! Don Carlos won't be able to leave!"

A long trail of bluish smoke was hanging in the middle of the room. "He is already here," said my Uncle Ivan. "Whatever you do, don't make a sound. Under no circumstances." He went and sat down in his chair, under the lighted chandelier, beside Isabella del Mancio. Isabella seemed to be enjoying herself mightily.

The trail of smoke eddied in the room to form a long spiral starting from the ceiling and ending on the floor. The spiral swirled faster and faster. There was a sound like the whistling of a hurricane that came closer every second. At a certain moment, the trail of smoke spun round so fast that it was no longer visible. It had become a sort of transparent blue light. Then I heard the most fearsome neigh it is possible to imagine. It sounded at one and the same time like the cry of an animal and the noise of thunder.

Within the bluish light, the vague shape of a white horse was moving. It was a magnificent animal with an extremely long mane and a superb tail. "What a fine horse," whispered Isabella del Mancio.

"Keep quiet," replied my uncle. "Do you want to bring disaster upon us?"

The horse neighed again and began to trot around the parlor. It circled the room two or three times, and then went and stood in the blue light again. Then it raised its head toward the ceiling and neighed quite softly.

Then there appeared the most extraordinary and the most repulsive being it has ever been given to a human being to see. It was not a man, it was a veritable Titan. Seated on the horse, Don Carlos appeared even bigger than he must be in reality. His head almost touched the ceiling. I had never seen such an ugly face or such a vicious expression. I cannot describe here the horror this giant inspired in me. He was ugly, with an almost unbearable ugliness, and his extraordinary size added still further to this ugliness. He gazed around him as though looking for something that he couldn't find. His forehead was creased and he seemed angry. He dismounted from his horse and circled the room, as the horse had done before.

Isabella del Mancio was no longer laughing. She was extremely pale and clutched my Uncle Ivan's shoulders.

Don Carlos seemed to be more and more furious. He remounted his horse. The horse walked slowly toward the mirror. But suddenly Isabella rose and approached the horse. Neither my uncle nor I could suppress a cry of amazement. We cried out just as Isabella touched the horse with the tips of her fingers. The horse reared up as if a hand of fire had touched it. Don Carlos turned toward Isabella, seemed to see her for the first time, and bent down to her. He looked her straight in the eyes. Isabella seemed to be hypnotized by his look and did not move. Don Carlos took off his right glove and placed his hand on Isabella's face. His nails sank into the young woman's flesh and, as Isabelle screamed with pain, five trickles of blood ran down her face.

Unable to restrain himself, my Uncle Ivan threw himself upon Isabella del Mancio. He tried with all his strength to snatch her from the ghost's

clutches, but to no avail. Then he ran to the fireplace, picked up an enormous candlestick and struck Don Carlos on the left arm. Don Carlos opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Finally he let go of poor Isabella, who collapsed on the floor. A few shreds of flesh remained clinging to Don Carlos' nails. My uncle dropped the candlestick, shouting: "Run! Run, before it's too late! Don Carlos has seen us! We're lost!... No, there's one chance. Open the window wide. Don Carlos will think it's the mirror and jump through it."

Meanwhile, Don Carlos, who had dismounted from his horse, had gone to the mirror and observed that it was broken. He turned slowly and looked at my uncle, still holding his left arm. "Quick, hurry," cried my uncle.

I rushed to the nearest window and threw it open. The wind blew into the room and frightened Don Carlos' horse.

The animal seemed incredibly frightened. It began running about the room in all directions, knocking everything over as it passed. Don Carlos seized it by the mane and climbed onto it. My uncle had squeezed up against the wall to avoid the horse. "Run! Run! Don Carlos is angry! Nothing can stop him now! The mirror is broken! Don Carlos cannot leave!"

Then I watched the most horrible sight of my life. An atrocious vision that has left in me an infinite vertigo of sorrow and horror. Don Carlos' horse galloped about the room in all directions while his master kept turning round in order not to lose sight of my Uncle Ivan. My uncle ran to avoid being trampled on by the maddened beast. The crushed and bleeding body of Isabella del Mancio lay by the fireplace. I was hidden behind my curtain and could not move, paralyzed by all the horrors I was seeing.

At a certain moment, the horse passed very close to my Uncle Ivan. Don Carlos bent down, picked him up and laid him across his saddle, in front of the pommel. I let out a great yell and hurled myself at the animal. But it was too late. Don Carlos had seen the window and his horse was already through it. "Good-bye," cried my uncle. "I loved you too much...."

Next day, in the village, a fisherman swore he had seen -a horse galloping on the sea. Two men were on the horse. One seemed to be very tall. The

other was not moving. He seemed to be dead.

Live on Tape

Spider Robinson

> *The fantasy and horror magazines have been thoroughly independent for the most part, without institutional, commercial, or grant support. In the United States, where grant support is next to impossible anyway, this attitude is a blessing. In Canada, where there is a lot of grant support available, it becomes more attractive to go for the mainstream package and get funded. Hence Canada's highly active small presses have left less room, compared to the lower half of North America, for fantasy magazines. A few exceptions have been Dark Fantasy, Potboiler, Borderland, Dragonfields, and Stardock. This latter ran only two issues and was edited by Charles R. Sounders, who has since gone on to considerable success as a screenwriter and, for DAW Books, a novelist.*

For the premiere issue of Stardock (Summer, 1977), the multiple award-winning author Spider Robinson, always supportive of his fellow Canadians, contributed the following tale.

> *Dear StarWolf:*
>
> *I won't tell you at the outset how the following came into my hands. All I can say is that the more I think about it, the scareder I get. Its implications are terrifying.*
>
> *You may as well run it in your fanzine as sf: no mainstream editor would touch it -- for reasons, which will become obvious. I can't claim authorship of the manuscript -- but for equally obvious reasons, no one else ever will.*

Figuratively yours (?)
Spider

It is said that the most terrible moment of all comes when you reach within yourself -- and close on emptiness. I, on the other hand, am afraid that I will not. But I must find out.

I have been accustomed to think of myself as a reasonably talented writer. I am not the kind of writer who can produce pay-copy on command, with regular working hours and a dependable steady output. But occasionally lightning strikes. The Muse possesses me for a time and then leaves. In between, I wait for inspiration.

I find this frustrating, but I make a fair living and I take pride in what I have written. Recently, however, the situation became intolerable. The rent was due, the electricity, oil, and phone bills likewise, and the cupboard was doing a slow striptease, halfway to bare. Obviously, it was time for the Muse to bail me out again.

And the fickle bitch was nowhere to be found.

For 3.5 weeks I followed established custom and did nothing -- or rather, went about my normal daily routine, stuffing the chinks with paperback books and judicious doses of Johnny Walker, confident that sooner or later a perfectly good story idea would be shuffled and dealt into my subconscious.

Nothing.

I spent a week working like hell, getting my desk clear, my chores done, and my responsibilities put off -- clearing the next week for deep-soak concentration. During that week I reread some of my favorite Old Masters for inspirations, analyzing their structure and clarifying their themes, seeking some kind of common denominator.

Nothing.

The next week was not clear for contemplation, but I took it anyway, letting mail, bills, household maintenance, and social obligations pile up. By the end of 6.2 days I had become desperate: I cracked my Ideas card file and pored over the notions and fragments jotted down over the last 10 years. This is a last-ditch method, which had never failed me yet.

Nada.

By now so much had piled up that I was able to convince myself that it was the clutter that was distracting me. I felt bloated, in the last stages of creative pregnancy, and I decided I needed a warm peaceful unharried place in which to give birth. I borrowed a friend's apartment, a Mend who was both a neatness freak and away on vacation. In that simple, structured, undistracting environment I sat for 4.75 days, staring at a blank piece of paper and chewing the points off 5 successive felt-tipped pens. During the last 2 days I stopped getting up at 6-hour intervals to heat up frozen dinners.

Zilch.

Now I was desperate. In a dark corner of my mind a slithery voice whispered, "Writer'sBlock," a phrase equalled for gut-clenching terror only by "Primary Impotence." In fact, the 2 disasters are quite similar: Centipede's Dilemmas, in which thinking about the problem causes the problem. "Put it out of your mind," I told myself heartily. "You're choking up, trying too hard. Relax."

I cleaned up the mess I'd made in my friend's apart., went back to my own and threw myself into getting it shipshape again. 9 days later my apartment was immaculate, my desk was a still life and my social life had been renewed. But I was rotten company; because the oil company, the power company, the phone company and my landlord were all have a convention on my back. Still I persevered in not persevering, telling myself that if I just shut my eyes tightly enough I'd see a story.

Nothing, negatory, nihil. You will be given $1,000,000, 000.00, an expert concubine and the admiration of your fellows if during the next ten seconds you do not think of the word "donut." Go.

Aw, I'm terribly sorry. Try again sometime.

I took advice from any who offered it, and tried every single suggestion. The 2 most frequent were Misdirection and Change of Scene, and I had already tried those, but I ruled out no other suggestion however dubious. I do not believe that there is a single known psychoactive drug of which some of my friends is not a user/proponent/proselyte, and in the ensuing month I tried at least 3 dosage levels of (in order) marijuana, alcohol, hashish, LSD, STP, PCP, synthetic THC, benzedrine, methedrine, ibogaine, amyl nitrate, Valium, Lib-rium, mescaline (real and synthetic), and psilocybin (likewise), amanita muscaria, peyote, yohimbe bark, ginseng root, nitrous oxide, and 3 others which even the source could not name -- in addition, of course, to my usual caffeine and nicotine.

Result: 0.00

I tried going to bed early and staying up until dawn, going for long walks and holing up in the apartment, cold showers and hot showers, celibacy and promiscuity, fasting and force-feeding, TV and transcendental meditation, prayer and even (in desperation) despair.

No sale, null & void, inoperative, goose egg, nothingness, (1-1), minus sales tax, postage and carrying charges. Not in service at this time. Negative infinity, absence of being, nought nothing nothing NOTHING.

At this point I came to a screeching halt.

I had to; gibbering madness was 1 step ahead. It was worse than frustrating, worse than terrifying: it was humiliating. My self-respect, my image of self-worth, rested on pillars few and fragile -- and the largest of these was the knowledge that I was a writer, that I could lay claim to at least a modest creativity. To have my nose rubbed in the fact that I could not do the trick at will was galling. I had always thought of my talents as 1 of the few things uniquely mine -- bat now I realized that I could not prove ownership. Who controls a thing owns it.

Well, who did own it then?

The Muse? Bullshit: that glib non-answer had been good enough for the last 10,000 years, but I was damned if I'd agree that the major achievement of my life to date had been to become the mouthpiece for a myth. Come down to it, I didn't believe in Muses. Or tooth fairies or Santa Claus, or elves who cobble the boots while you sleep.

But what did I believe in? Where did all those lovely ideas come from? I picked a story at random from the Sold Copy file, and it happened to be 1 of the Is I was proudest of. Now how had that come to be written?

3 hours later I was shaking. I could remember typing the story, I could remember mailing the story, I could even remember the things I had been doing with my life during the 2.5 weeks it took me to finish the story.

The memory of the actual writing was gone. A blank.

Oh, if I strained to the limit I could recall moments when I had been physically inscribing the words-to-be-typed in my spiral notebook with my Flair pen -- but only when the inscribing was of words I had already composed in my mind. The actual creation itself was a blank in my memories, and those rare wonderful moments when I was creating as I wrote, fast as I could set it down, were gone, inferable only by their absence. And of course, by the stories that had resulted. But the moments themselves I could not recollect.

I pulled more manuscripts out of the trunk, and set about a systematic analysis of the body of my own work.

Perhaps you don't understand just how desperate I had to be to do that. The last question any writer will willingly ask himself is how he writes. We all share the subconscious conviction that there is a kind of Heisenberg Principle of Creativity, that if we study it, it will go away. We think of the Muse as a shy, trembling unicorn, who may flee forever if we beat the bushes for her. Myself, I had been accustomed to think of my talent as a starship, a relic of a long-vanished empire, which took me to strange and wondrous worlds and galaxies -- but only in accordance with its own, apparently random programming. I was afraid to start throwing switches in

an attempt to locate the controls. I might blow the drive -- and it's lonely out there.

I remembered the words of a writer friend of mine, whom I had called for advice. "It's like there's this cabinet, somewhere in the back of my mind, and I get good and lost, and when I look up there's this cabinet. I open it up every time I see it, and some of the time -- not always -- the elves have left a story inside.

"Sometimes I think I should send a mapping expedition back there, like Lewis & Clark. But I have this terrible certainty that if I ever got the back of my mind all mapped and charted, the cabinet wouldn't be there anymore, because there wouldn't be any place for it to be. I know it's crazy -- but that little cabinet has been paying my rent for some time now, and I'm not going to mess with it."

When I was younger, I had a recurring fantasy, which I later used in 1 of my most successful stories. It started when I got lost 1 day, in my own neighborhood. I mean, I was 14, and I was walking over to see my friend Perry, who lived all of 6 blocks away, and I had walked to Perry's house perhaps 500 times. I could no more get lost on the way to Perry's house than I could have got lost on the way to the bathroom. And I was walking alone, thinking my thoughts and absently appreciating the day, which was warm and pleasant -- and suddenly I realized that I had missed a turn somehow, and was nowhere near Perry's house. It happens to everyone: you're going somewhere and woolgathering and you miss your turn. And I stopped, like everyone does, and called myself a dope, like everyone does, and I might have turned around and retraced my steps like anyone would -- except for the thought that suddenly froze me in my tracks.

If I had not noticed that I wasn't going where I wanted "r to -- where would I have ended up?

Okay, maybe I have an overfertile imagination. But the question fascinated me, kept recurring in my mind, and half seriously I evolved the fantasy that when people get lost that way, in familiar territory, they're actually trying to reach a destination which only their subconscious knows -- that some racial instinct keeps trying to draw us... someplace... like white corpuscles racing

to an unguessable destination. If that were so, I hypothesized, and then some counterforce prevented us from ever reaching that destination -- for we always snap out of it before our feet can lead us there, brought up short by our own sense of responsibility.

The notion hung on for years, being renewed every time I found myself on the wrong street. A place that Something won't let you find. But how then could one know that place?

Damn it, I got the same feeling every time I tried to trace my own creativity back to its roots. Grasp, and it became intangible. Look, and it became invisible. Listen, and it fell silent. It was as though I had been created unable to know it, as though I had been ordered not to think about it.

As though I had been ordered not to think about it.

Suppose you had the skill and technology to make a sentient computer, a self-aware thinking machine. You'd think out the implications quite carefully before attempting such a thing. If you were compassionate you'd wonder a bit about the ethics of creating a captive intelligence, a thinking being whose very identity was subject to another's will -- to the will of anyone with access to its inputs. And if you were merely cautious, you'd want to guard against the computer's going maverick on you, taking over control of its own destiny to its own unimaginable ends, insisting on free will. Frankenstein's Dilemma, if you will.

Either way, you might decide not to tell the sentient computer that it's a sentient computer. You might program it with a false awareness of identity, and then construct a plausible universe for it to live in. You might program it to believe itself a human, alive in a world of its fellows -- and then observe and study the "life" it "leads." You would, naturally, include a program forbidding it to examine its own origins -- requiring it to dismiss the questions as unanswerable (I can't remember a thing that happened to me before age 3). There would be automatic cut-outs to prevent the false "self" from wandering into "places" which had not been written into the program, and to prevent the hoodwinked intelligence from thinking about itself thinking. It would be prevented from "seeing" the place where all fresh data came from.

I've got to get this off my chest, the lunatic notion that has kept me sleepless these last 4 nights (why am I so preoccupied with numbers?) but I'm scared witless to write it down. Suppose it's true?

I don't believe there'd be any way to read the thoughts of a sentient computer. But if I accept -- oh, tentatively -- the hypotheses outlined above, there must be, in this fictional universe I inhabit, some special significance to recording my thoughts. I am, after all, a writer.

Dammit, I've been crouching in this apartment for three days and come what may I have to know, but I'm scared.

Because maybe right now the apparent act of writing these words down is causing them to appear on a read-out tape somewhere, and maybe right this second someone is studying the tape and frowning (in compassion, I hope in compassion) and deciding to pull the pi

Wolf -- me again. I still won't tell you where 1 found this -- but I will tell you the part that gives me the willies. I had to translate it. The original's in binary. Where do you get your ideas, old buddy?

Mine truly (?)
Spider

The Head of the Hydra Flower

Carol Reid

Carol Reid lives on Powell River, British Columbia, from which address I received a manuscript submitted to Fantasy Macabre, *a ghostly tale entitled "The Coffin Builder," with all the beauty and charnal romanticism of Poe or Gautier. I wrote back at once begging for any other manuscripts available and received a second stunning composition, this time of vampirism and ennui, called "A Feast of Ashes." I was by then willing to feature a Carol Reid story in every issue of* Fantasy Macabre *I put together, so long as Carol remains willing to let me use them!*

"The Head of the Hydra Flower" has had no previous publication.

Mara set down the untidy bunch of wildflowers outside Mother's bedroom door and listened, holding her breath till the heavy tide of her blood pounded in her ears. Mother must have heard her approach, for she had stepped down hard with her little feet on every step' that creaked. Mother must have heard and understood the protesting of the dry wood of the staircase, "Mara comes, Mara comes," for they had lived a lifetime in this house, and each knew its cries and whispers as a mother knows her child's.

Mara stepped back from the doorway and sat down on the second step of the staircase. A patch of light had settled there, flowing in from the small window set into the house's eastern face. She crouched and huddled, trying to fit entirely into the square of gentle morning light that waned where it touched.

The patch had narrowed some by the time that Mother's bedroom door was opened, popping like the seal of a vacuum jar, and Mara felt a rush of cool

cologne-scented ah- as Mother knelt in the doorway and took up the bouquet in her hands, turning it over and over as one would the limp body of a sparrow, dead apparently, but without a wound.

Mara spoke in the soft tones that were kind to" Mother's ears. "I found them at the lakeshore, Mother, cast away. Perhaps they be the bridal flowers of a nymph who left her bewitched lover standing on the sand and dove into the water...." The tale was sweet as syrup in a golden-tinted glass, and Mara held it to the light of her mind's eye. Perhaps if she returned now to the lakeshore she would find the naiad's lover still bewitched, still waiting for his bride. Would he perceive that she was mortal, only? This she did not speak aloud.

"Foxglove is poison," Mother said, stroking the deep pink bellflower that nestled among the columbines, and then, like a wisp of smoke, she slipped behind the bedroom door and was gone.

The sun moved higher in the sky, leaving Mara in shadow. She went down into the kitchen and found some bread, which she broke apart and spread with strong cheese. She poured a glass of cider from the carafe that stood always full on the shelf of the cold room, and took her meal alone at the bare oak table that was strewn with crumbs and dust.

She turned and straddled the bench she sat upon, and through the cloudy window watched the knobby flowering cherry tree, the one surviving beauty of the garden, as it dropped its petals on the breeze. A soft confetti rain fell upon the bare branches of the wild rose and the brown skeletons of hydrangeas, whose branch tips were torn and gnawed as bitten nails.

At the lakeshore there were flowers, bursting alive, enough to gather and cast away, and gather again.

The house was silent.

At the lakeshore the breeze made the alders tremble and laugh, and the water lapped softly over the silt and sand. Unseen birds clucked and chattered, dropping from nowhere to pierce the body of a fish with their bills and claws, and then vanishing again, hardly burdened by their prize.

There, she-creatures with slender, graceful bodies moved in the lake at twilight, between the snaking tendrils of the waterflowers, and then danced into deeper channels, down and down into the wet blackness.

The house was dark and silent, even early in the afternoon.

The lakeshore was forbidden.

Mara brought Mother's tea and toast up on a tray borrowed from the luncheonette in town, years before. It was a sturdy tray, undaunted by countless rings from teacups and overheated plates. It endured, even to the gold-stamped letters that spelled out "Purdy's," and reminded Mara daily of the theft, though it had never occurred to her to return it. She had been a mere child then, floundering in the full-size chair she had been sat in, the knife and fork over-large and clumsy in her hands. Mother had sat at her side, demurely pushing the food in delicate circles around her plate. The man had put out his wide flat hands, one on Mother's arm, and one on her own; then, as now, it had all seemed so totally without reason that Mara doubted that it had happened at all.

Mother opened the door to receive her meal, accepting the tray with steady hands. “Bring me the head of the hydra flower," she said, and shut the door.

Mara stayed a long time on the stairs, watching the shadows flow along the banister like slow black polish. So cold it grew in the house at twilight, such a cold to which one never grew accustomed, unlike die numbing cold of lakewater, that comforted in the end.

Never had the staircase loomed so steep, the darkness at its foot so full of dread.

All these long years, the lakeshore had been forbidden, and yet these past days she had been compelled to go there, again and again. Once to fetch a red-veined stone, another time the tender root of a squirrel-house tree, and just this morning... what was it she had been sent to find this morning? It was then that she had found the flowers strewn upon the sand. And now she

must return to the forbidden place, this time to gather up the nine floating blossoms of the hydra, by this time closed into plump yellow buds, and rips them from the submerged stalk that was rooted into the lake bottom. There was less than an hour before darkness and she must walk through town to reach the place. She clamored down the staircase and wrapped herself swiftly in scarf and cloak. A sudden, small voice spoke inside her ear, "hurry, hurry!" and she flew into the street, her cloak billowing at her back, as purple as the creeping edges of the evening sky.

"Witch! Witch!" the familiar boy-voices followed her as she pattered down the sidewalk of the village street. Why did they always taunt her so? She most certainly was not a witch, for she had seen them pictured in her nursery books -- bent, foul creatures that consorted with cats and worshipped the devil or the moon. Anyone could see that she was not of that race, fair and straight of limb as she was, and in truth she worshipped no one. The only thing to which she was deeply drawn was the lake and that, though she had recently been compelled to go there, was forbidden. Much as they yearned to dip into the silver water, to immerse her face and body li within, she knew her wish to be impossible. She knew, all too well, that once submerged, she would drown. Mother, while bathing her once, had shown her the truth of this.

She passed by Purdy's luncheonette, and hugged herself inside her cloak. Inside, diners sat in pairs at tiny tables and took their food together. There seemed no mystery in it, no secret to their ritual.

The night sky was closing in ever faster as she neared the path that led down to the water. She must hurry, hurry!

The lapping of the lake was a special music to her ears, a friendly slopping sound. All day the lake had caught and held a reservoir of light that it now exuded, a silver shimmer that guided Mara to the thing she sought, the long braids of green and gold that were the hydra flower.

She lay along the trunk of a fallen alder that lay half-in, half-out of the water. The image of her outstretched hand was broken into a dozen hands, all reaching up to touch her as she reached to grasp the floating tendrils. The nine braided stems were all gathered in her hand, and still the image

hands reached up, almost breaking the surface of the water, almost touching Mara's skin. She tore the flowerheads from their stalks, and then looked again, but there was nothing to be seen but nine thin trails of inky black that dissipated quickly, and the fading image of her pale face in the darkening water.

She rose, brushing bits of leaf and bark from her cloak, and smiled at the ascending moon, the golden goddess of the witches, merely an orb of stone, dead as night without the sun to give it light, alone without the mirror of water to reflect its sad, pockmarked face. Hardly a venerable presence, but to witches. Perhaps just now, in the woods, a ring of crones were keening to it, burning their bits of filthy sod, and shaking their fetishes of woven hair and bone, even now as Mara stepped alone along the path, her armful of dripping flowers dribbling a trail of quicksilver at her feet. She pricked her ears, but the woods were silent and still, but for the friendly lapping of the lake upon the shore.

The sky was black by the time she found herself home. She hung her cloak on the hook behind the door, and took her prize into the kitchen, where she wiped bits of silt from the smooth green stems, and dried the yellow blooms that were closed up hard, protecting the soft red centers from the vapors and cold of night.

She mounted the ever-protesting stairs, trailing the green streamers of leaf behind her like a queen of May. The air above was laced with orient perfume, a smell of spices set afire, and a bitter scent of something wet that smoldered. She tapped at Mother's door with her elbow, fearful that her prize might fall. The flowers had lost warmth since their uprooting and had taken on a waxen glaze that was cool as fruit in Mara's warm hands.

The door popped and opened, and Mother reached out to receive the armful of blossoms. Inside the room, on the bedside table where Mother took her meals, stood the tray that had borne the tea and toast Mara had brought her. Upon the plate there was a mash, streaked pink and white, a taper burning, and a cup, striped with melted paraffin. Mother turned and pushed shut the door with her bare foot.

Mara's hands were sticky with the sap of the hydra, and her clothes and body smelled of mud. In her room she poured water into the basin and plunged her arms and face within, rubbing herself dry on the soft fabric of her shirt. Sleep came fast, and in her dream she confronted those who taunted her, a brace plus three of faces flat as coins, street-weary bodies stooped like sunflowers, save the one whose dark eyes met hers, and did not call her "witch." She dreamed of a lover who never spoke, and a marriage bed of water and glass, broad as the night sky and as deep.

She awoke to a tapping and, opening her eyes, saw a thread of grey light slip in between the gap of the heavy drapes. Mother crept in, holding a taper and a cup.

She spoke, "We who fast at night will sup when the moon is down, and the sun is up." Her hope-filled smile dwindled, and she bounced like a petulant child at the foot of Mara's bed.

"We have come to our wits' end," Mother said, setting down the cup and tapping her forehead with two fingers. A new smile appeared, making her radiant once more, and Mara longed to embrace her, but the hand that held the taper stood stiff between them, and its flame, however tiny, still could burn.

Mother offered her the cup, saying, "Eat the mash, and purge thy heart of the heavy, dark, and mortal part, and no more shall you banished be from the silver waters of the free... I have ground the root and bloom with stone, and took from the hydra the immortal one... with tooth and drool have bound the magic through, here, take the dowry that I offer you..."

Mara peered within. The pink-white mash was veined with yellow, and in its center, like a beating heart, was a globule of red. Her flesh turned strangely cold, as if touched by a dozen gelid hands as Mother pushed the cup up close to her mouth. In the increasing daylight she saw Mother's hands, stained grass green and pollen yellow but for the fine pink webbing between her fingers, and on her face, the ring of yellow green that stained her mouth. Mara felt a movement in her belly, like a tide that rose and fell, tingling through her skin.

"Come with me to the lakeshore, Mother," Mara said, and led her out into the hall and down the staircase, Mother cradling the cup like the last candle in a storm.

Mara wrapped her in the purple cloak, taking for herself the old black overcoat that had hung unused from before Mara could remember. Still it reeked of street smells and something like burned meat, but its weight was pleasant on Mara's back, and it was warm.

Outside, the world was drained of color, and mist clung like sleep to the eyes of dawn. The streets were empty. Even the first pot of Purdy's coffee was not yet brewed, and the pack of youths huddled in their dens, not long asleep, but deeply so. The early summer dew fell heavy on Mother's face, and her skin shone as if young again in the kind light of daybreak. Now, they stood upon the path that was pitted from three seasons of rain, and carpeted with roots and brambles run wild.

Mother stopped, grasping a tree branch and leaning upon it, her eyes shut tight, her stained lips moving, making no sound. Mara touched the brittle shelf of bone that trembled beneath the purple cloak, startling Mother's eyes open, and the breeze rose up, stirring the maples and alders to chattering, "Mara comes," and just ahead the lake foamed with the flapping and splashing of jumping fish. Mother's eyes grew wide, and she again pressed the cup of mash to Mara's lips, so close that she could taste its scent of mown grass and wildflowers in bloom.

"And no more shall you banished be from the silver waters of the free...." With one stained hand she stroked the coat that Mara wore, shaking her head as if rousing from a half-remembered dream. She lay her palms against her eyes, and the breeze and fish were stilled.

The lake lay flat and cold as steel before them. Near its edge the tangled roots of the hydra flower were already sending up tiny green-gold shoots, nine floating strands, braided three by three just beneath the surface.

The mash was cold and thick, its perfume stale. Mara circled Mother's shoulders with one arm and held her fast, and poured the potion into her gaping mouth. Tears streamed from Mother's eyes, ribbons of ice blue

against the whiteness of her skin. The empty cup dropped and broke in two, oozing the remains of the pink-white mash into the sand, and a sigh rippled through the trees and the lake and the long-sealed flaps of skin on either side of Mother's throat. Her gills were coral-hued; exquisite ruffles of netting fine as tulle that undulated softly in the dew-soaked breeze. Mother tore at the garments that constricted her, the heavy cloak, the sheer damp silk of her dressing gown, the soft cloying cotton of her chemise, all the while watching Mara curiously, cautiously, as one species regards another. She stood naked, shimmering, on the shore, her hair falling free of its pins and ribbons, her arms outstretched to the barely rippling water. Mara watched her walk into the lake and disappears silently beneath the surface. After a moment she emerged, far from shore, a silver arc that rose and fell, a mere glint in the light of the rising sun.

Mara gathered up the shreds of Mother's garments, and then scattered them along the path. Others had done so before... here lay a leather shoe dark with mold, there a mound of tattered underthings, and near the spot where only yesterday she had found a like bouquet, a bunch of wildflowers were strewn upon the sand. She picked out a bleeding heart and tasted it, drawing its sweet green stem between her teeth, and wondered absently as she strolled back into town, when, oh when, would they ever meet again?

The Manhattan Phone Book (Abridged)

John Varley

An area of small press activity impossible to keep tabs of is the convention "program book." Every fantasy and science fiction convention (and there are dozens of them annually) produces a program book, occasionally with short stories included, often by the convention's Guest of Honor, So it sometimes happens that a story by someone exceedingly well known has been read by nobody except some convention's attendees.

One particularly interesting program book was imaginatively designed for WesterCon 37 (it was in Portland, Oregon, that year). It looked exactly like an issue o/The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, *with a spectacular cover painted by Alex Schomburg. Featured among other good things were articles by Elinor Busby and Harlan Ellison, stories by Edward Bryant and F. M. Busby, a fable by Vonda N. Mclntyre, and John Varley's half-essay satiric horror story reprinted here.*

This is the best story and the worst story anybody ever wrote.

There's lots of ways to judge the merit of a story, right? One of them is, are there a lot of people in it, and are they real. Well, this story has more people in it than any story in the history of the world. The Bible? Forget it. Ten thousand people, tops. (I didn't count, but I suspect it's less than that, even with all the begats.)

And real? Each and every character is a certified living human being. You can fault me on depth of characterization, no question about it. If I'd had the time and space, I could have told you a lot more about each of these people... but a writer has dramatic constraints to consider. If only I had more room. Wow! What stories you'd hear!

Admittedly, the plot is skimpy. You can't have everything. The strength of this story is its people. I'm in it. So are you.

It goes like this:

Jerry L. Aab moved to New York six years ago from his 'home in Valdosta, Georgia. He still speaks with a Southern accent, but he's gradually losing it. He's married to a woman named Elaine, and things haven't been going too well for the Aab family. Their second child died, and Elaine is pregnant again. She thinks Jerry is seeing another woman. He isn't, but she's talking divorce.

Roger Aab isn't related to Jerry. He's a native New Yorker. He lives in a third-floor walk-up at 1 Maiden Lane. It's his first place; Roger is just nineteen, a recent high school graduate, thinking about attending City College. Right now, while he makes up his mind, he works in a deli and tries to date Linda Cooper, who lives two blocks away. He hasn't really decided what to do with his life yet, but is confident a decision will come.

Kurt Aach is on parole. He served two years in Attica, upstate, for armed robbery. It wasn't his first stretch. He had vague ideas of going straight when he got out. If he could join the merchant marine he figures he just might make it, but the lousy jobs he's been offered so far aren't worth the trouble. He just bought a.38 Smith and Wesson from a guy on the docks. He cleans and oils it a lot.

Robert Aach is Kurt's older brother. He never visited Kurt in prison because he hates the worthless bum. When he thinks of his brother, he hopes the state will bring back the electric chair real soon. He has a wife and three kids. They like to go to Florida when he gets a vacation.

Adrienne Aaen has worked at the Woolworths on East 14th Street since she was twenty-one. She's pushing sixty now, and will be retired soon, involuntarily. She never married. She has a sour disposition, mostly because of her feet, which have hurt for forty years. She has a cat and a parakeet. The cat is too lazy to chase the bird. Adrienne has managed to save a little money. Every night she thanks God for all her blessings, and the City of New York for rent control.

Molly Aagard is thirty and works for the New York Transit Police. She rides the subway every day. She's charged with stopping the serious crimes that infest the underground city, and she works very hard at it. She *hates* the wall-to-wall graffiti that blooms in every car like a malign fungus.

Irving Aagard is no relation. He's fifty-five and owns an Oldsmobile dealership in New Jersey. People ask him why he lives in Manhattan, and he is always puzzled by the question. Would they rather he lived in Jersey, for chrissake? To Irving, Manhattan is the only place to live. He has enough money to send his three kids -- Gerald, Morton, and Barbara -- to good schools. He frets about crime, but no more than anyone else.

Sheila Aagre is a seventeen-year-old streetwalker from St. Paul. Her life isn't so great, but it's better than Minnesota. She uses heroin, but knows she can stop whenever she wants to.

Theodore Aaker and his wife, Beatrice, live in a fine apartment a block away from the Dakota, where John Lennon was killed. They went out that night and stood in the candlelight vigil, remembering Woodstock, remembering the summer of love in Haight-Ashbury. Theodore sometimes wonders how and why he got into stocks and bonds. Beatrice is pregnant with their first child. She is deciding how much time she should take off from her law practice. It's a hard question.

(162,000 characters omitted)

Clemanzo Cruz lives on East 120th Street. He's unemployed and has been since he arrived from Puerto Rico. He hangs out in a bar at the corner of Lexington and 122nd. He didn't used to drink much back in San Juan but now that's about all he does. It's been fifteen years. You might say he is discouraged. His wife, Ilona, goes to work at five P.M. at the Empire State Building, where she scrubs floors and toilets. She's been mugged a dozen times on the way home on the number 6 Lexington local.

Zelda Cruz shares an apartment with two other secretaries. Even with roommates it's hard to make ends meet with New York rents the way they are. She always has a date Saturday night -- she's quite a beauty -- and she swings very hard, but Sunday morning always finds her at early mass at St.

Patrick's. There's this guy who she thinks may ask her to get married. She's decided she'll say yes. She's tired of sharing an apartment. She hopes he won't beat her up.

Richard Cruzado drives a cab. He's a good-natured guy. He's been known to take fares into darkest Brooklyn. His wife's name is Sabina. She's always after him to buy a house in Queens. He thinks one of these days he will. They have six children, and life is tough for them in Manhattan. Those houses out in Queens have back yards, pools, you name it.

(1,250,000 characters omitted)

Ralph Zzyzzmjac changed his name two years ago. His real name is Ralph Zyzzmjac. A friend persuaded him to add a z to be the last guy in the phone book. He's a bachelor, a librarian working for the City of New York. For a good time he goes to the movies, alone. He's sixty-one.

Edward Zzzzyniewski is crazy. He's been in and out of Bellevue. He spends most of his time thinking about that bastard Zzyzzmjac, who two years ago knocked him out of last place, his only claim to fame. He broods about him -- a man he's never met -- fantasizing that Zzyzzmjac is out to get him. Lasf year he added two z's to his name. Now he's thinking about stealing a march on that bastard Zzyzzmjac. He's *sure* Zzyzzmjac is adding two more z's this year, so he's going to add *seven.* Ed Zzzzzzzzzzayniewski. That'd be nice, he decides.

Then one day seventeen thermonuclear bombs exploded in the air over Manhattan, The Bronx, and Staten Island, too. They had a yield of between five and twenty megatons each. This was more than enough to kill everyone in this story. Most of them died instantly. A few lingered for minutes or hours, but they *all* died, just like that. I died. So did you.

I was lucky. In less time than it takes for one neuron to nudge another I was turned into radioactive atoms, and so was the building I was in, and the ground beneath me to a depth of three hundred meters. In a millisecond it was all as sterile as Edward Teller's soul.

You had a tougher time of it. You were in a store, standing near a window. The huge pressure wave turned the glass into ten thousand slivers of pain, one thousand of which tore the flesh from your body. One sliver went into your left eye. You were hurled to the back of the store, breaking a lot of bones and suffering internal injuries, but you still lived. There was a big piece of plate glass driven through your body. The bloody point emerged from your back. You touched it carefully, trying to pull it out, but it hurt too much.

On the piece of glass was a rectangular decal and the message "Mastercard Gladly Accepted."

The store caught fire around you, and you started to cook slowly. You had time to think "Is this what I pay taxes for?" and then you died.

This story is brought to you courtesy of The Phone Company. Copies of this story can be found near every telephone in Manhattan, and thousands of stories just like it have been compiled for every community in the United States. They make interesting reading. I urge you to read a few pages every night. Don't forget that many wives are listed only under their husband's name. And there are the children to consider: very few have their own phone. Many people -- such as single women -- pay extra for an unlisted number. And there are the very poor, the transients, the street people, and folks who were unable to pay the last bill. Don't forget any of them as you read the story. Read as much or as little as you can stand, and ask yourself if this is what you want to pay your taxes for. Maybe you'll stop.

Aw, c'mon, I hear you protest. *Somebody* will survive.

Perhaps. Possibly. Probably.

But that's not the point. We all love after-the-bomb stories. If we didn't, why would there be so many of them? There's something attractive about all those people being gone, about wandering in a depopulated world, scrounging cans of Camp-bell's pork and beans, defending one's family from marauders. Sure, it's horrible, sure we weep for all those dead people. But some secret part of us thinks it would be good to survive, to start all over.

Secretly, we know we'll survive. All those *other* folks will die. That's what after-the-bomb stories are all about.

All those after-the-bomb stories are lies. Lies, lies? lies.

This is the only true after-the-bomb story you will ever read.

Everybody dies. Your father and mother are decapitated and crushed by a falling building. Rats eat their severed heads. Your husband is disemboweled. Your wife is blinded, flash-burned, and gropes along a street of cinders until fear-crazed dogs eat her alive. Your brother and sister are incinerated in their homes, their bodies turned into fine powdery ash by firestorms. Your children... ah, I'm sorry, I hate to tell you this, but your children live a *long* time. Three eternal days. They spend those days puking their guts out, watching the flesh fall from their bodies, smelling the gangrene in their lacerated feet, and asking you why it happened. But you aren't there to tell them. I already told you how you died.

It's what you pay your taxes for.

An Image in Twisted Silver

Charles L. Grant

The annual World Fantasy Convention, which moves about from state to state, occasionally from country to country, issues each year a program book of consciously artistic value, with stories, essays, and artwork by leading lights. Charles L. Grant's tale is taken from the 1986 program book, the year he was guest of honor, illustrated by that year's artist GoH Jeff Potter.

Charles is one of our best-selling horror novelists and an advocate of "quiet horror," as exemplified in his series of Shadows *anthologies. He's himself a master of the short form, as every reader of horror well knows. He's also active in the small presses, having contributed to* Whispers, Fantasy Macabre, Fantasy Tales, Fantasy Book, Weirdbook, Shayol, Midnight Sun, *and others. Author of over one hundred short tales, there are many, like "An Image in Twisted Silver," that have not yet been collected.*

Robert locked the bathroom door when Joann began screaming. He leaned against it and closed his eyes, felt the sweat on his brow, felt the damp cold under his arms, and felt the heel of his left foot tap rhythmically on the floor. In time to his wife's voice. Faster, now slower, now faster again when she realized what he'd done and threw something against the wall. His words were garbled, if words they were at all, and he stopped trying to give them meaning -- the sound of her was enough, the anger and the hatred and the overwhelming despair that had begun in her pale eyes when he told her he was going to quit the firm, that traveled in a rippling crescent from one cheek to the other, that settled around her mouth as her tongue licked her lips, as the lips began to tremble while the tears began to well, as her teeth clacked together as if she were freezing.

The sound of it beginning as a growl in her throat, pitching higher as she backed away from the kitchen table, higher still when she pointed at the stack of envelopes on the counter and demanded to know how the hell she was expected to pay all those bills if he no longer had a job. And why the hell hadn't he talked with her first, leaving the house that morning filled with the power of the righteous, the strength of ideals, the foolishness of the young who thought they'd live forever -- because the goddamned bills were over there, stacked on the counter and waiting for the goddamned checks that would never be written because he had principles but no goddamned sense and she was sick of listening to his goddamned sermons about living with himself, about sleeping, about what had to be done before the world was made right.

He'd said nothing.

She was still screaming.

He'd only watched her pace the kitchen, slamming a hand down, kicking a cabinet door, opening the refrigerator to show him the food that would have to last them a while because they'd just bought a new car, just returned from vacation, just redecorated the front room and their bedroom in anticipation of his raise, and so had raided their savings because it was all going to be just fine. Then she pointed out the window to the backyard where their children were playing and asked him too sweetly how she was expected to explain it to them when all they would understand was that Daddy no longer had to go to work in the morning, that Daddy had decided there was no future in the law if the law wouldn't ensure a future for those who lived it, for those who enforced it, for those who tried to make it affordable for those who needed it the most. How, she wanted to know, opening and closing drawers, still kicking at the doors, was she going to explain his professional suicide to their friends, and their family, and to herself when all she wanted was not to return to the rundown places they'd lived in while he'd studied, and if that was too much to ask why the hell were they still married.

He said nothing.

She was still screaming.

He opened his eyes and looked left, to the mirror over the basin, and to his face looking back. Distorted because of a flaw in the surface, a whorl and a bulge that elongated his neck and turned his hair to wire and gave his lips a silly smirk when he stood in the wrong spot while he was shaving. He shrugged at it now, wondering for a moment why it seemed so young, the way he used to be young, back in the days when he believed so damned strongly in everything he believed.

He laid his head back, feeling rage make the door tremble, feeling his own anger stiffen his spine and tighten his buttocks and finally force him to stand upright and turn around, hands in fists, ready to go after her and compel her to understand that it wasn't *he* who had changed since their days in college and their first day of marriage and their first years together as they dreamed of modest wealth, modest family, modest hopes; it wasn't *he* who had fallen in love with a house much too large for four people, who had fallen in love with the checks that could be written every month while he wrote the briefs dealing with the homeless and the unwanted that made local history; and it wasn't *he* who had almost laughed when he almost cried at the turnabout the office made the week before when one of his court appearances had failed, had reached the papers, had made him look like a Quixote in a three-piece suit and school tie.

He didn't move.

She was still screaming.

And he knew she was afraid.

He understood, though she didn't know it, what the future would be like until he was back on his feet, in his own office, in another town.

He was willing to take the risk. Like Scrooge after the Phantom has shown him the grave, he had come to loathe the cynicism and the defeatism that were cloaked in excuses of the real world, when the real world was only an excuse for old failures perpetuated on the young.

She hadn't listened when he tried to explain; she thought he was kidding.

She hadn't listened when he told her he couldn't take it anymore.

But she had listened this afternoon when he'd given her the news -- with the ear that had heard the cries of their first child in that place they had tried to make a home when all it was a hovel; with the ear that had heard him swear on his love for her and the boy that he would never permit them to live that way again.

Something hard crashed against the door.

He stepped back too quickly and the grey rug beneath him almost slipped out from under his feet. He grabbed for the basin counter and steadied himself, shook himself, winked I'm all right to his worried still-young reflection, and was astonished to see the tears in his eyes.

I'm not wrong, he told himself suddenly, fearing she had discovered a weakness; I'm not wrong. I'm not. I'm right, and you know it.

His children probably wouldn't understand, that much was true, and the only thing he could do was pray that understanding would come as they grew older. He loved them too much to deliberately hurt them, and he counted on their love for the support he would need even though they'd be blinded.

There was quiet.

Joann stopped her screaming.

His reflection lifted an eyebrow, and he turned to the door, wondering what she was up to, turned back and saw the expression on his face. A young face, doubting, and darkening with anger he couldn't feel. He shook his head. Distortions trembled. He stepped away and scrubbed his cheeks with his palms until the imperfections in the mirror had him strangling himself.

"Jesus," he said, and looked away quickly.

Something leaned against the door, and he heard Joann whisper his name. Not a begging. And not a quiet screaming. A name, nothing more, telling

him the tantrum was over and she was ready to talk.

He stared at the glass doorknob, at the towels on the rack, at his bathrobe on the hook near the top of the door.

"It's been so long," he heard her say. "Robert, it's been so long."

He closed his eyes briefly. Not denying, but holding her away, trying to keep her from telling him what he already knew. Too long in the trenches, too long for them to return.

He knew that.

He wasn't stupid.

He wasn't so much the fool that he hadn't coveted what he now had, hadn't worked the miserably long hours in order to build up what his banker not so laughingly called his estate, hadn't dreamt of even more until he was given the assignment to defend a charitable group who showed him the alleys and the gutters and the trash and the people who lived there because they'd grown too thin to walk the cracks; until he looked at them and remembered how his father had worked double shifts and his mother had worked as well and how his education had been paid for in their dying; until he came home one evening and was so filled with love at the sight of his wife and the sounds of his son and new daughter that he felt at once blessed, and disgusted with himself. A disgust because he knew that to beat the system he had to work in it, and in working in it had become lost, and in getting lost had lost his life.

Sentiment, he told himself.

His reflection stretched and widened and collapsed upon itself.

Easier for the rich, not so easy for those who caused it.

Practical. Windmills. Reality. It happens.

"Robert," she said. "Robert, please open the door."

He filled the basin with lukewarm water and splashed it on his face, looked up at his dripping reflection and could no longer see the tears.

"Idiot," he whispered.

The shattered face stared back, eyes narrow, lips tight, and he nearly laughed at the parody of anger he saw, reminding himself that even Scrooge had probably compromised a little the day after he had given over the free Christmas goose.

"Robert, come on, we have to talk. I'm sorry."

He knew she was sincere, that she wasn't lurking out there with a knife behind her back or a club in her hand; he knew that weeping for Tiny Tim wasn't the same as weeping for the man who lived in a cardboard box. He knew that now. Perhaps he hadn't known it before. Perhaps, in telling her over die last few months what he wanted to do if he ever got the nerve, he hadn't seen the response in her eyes, in the way she held him, in the way her hands clasped together, knuckles white while lips were smiling. Perhaps...

He reached for the doorknob and looked at himself in the mirror.

Jesus, he thought with a quiet laugh and shake of his head, it's a wonder I don't cut my head off every morning.

He laughed again, a bit louder, and told Joann not to worry, she'd scared him but he was fine.

She giggled and rattled the knob. "Open up," she said. *"I* think I'm ready."

"So am I," he told the face that looked at him with regret. "And the first thing in the morning I'm going to give you a new look, one that won't scare me awake."

"Robert?"

He turned the knob.

And his reflection reached out and tore a hole in his throat.

What Used to be Audrey

Nina Kiriki Hoffinan

Nina Kiriki Hoffinan's first short story appeared in the earlier volume of Tales by Moonlight. *Since then she's become a regular in Charles Grant's* Shadows *series, won the Writers of the Future Contest promoted by Scientology's late guru (but we can't hold that against her), and contributed to pulp magazines such as* Asimov's *and* Amazing. *She's spiced the content of many a small magazine also, including Bill Munster's* Footsteps, *Michael Ambrose's* Argonaut, *my own* Fantasy & Terror, *and an upcoming issue of Alain Everts's* Etchings & Odysseys. *"What Used to Be Audrey" was uncovered in* Arcane, *which seems to have had but one issue, and then sunk without trace, which is one of the less exciting aspects of the little magazines. Nina lives presently in Eugene, Oregon, noted for its high-density backward hippies (ask any punk bored out of town), science fiction authors, and unemployed lumberjacks.*

"Go away!" Mom yelled at what used to be Audrey. She had a knife in one hand, and she waved it under what used to be Audrey's nose. I would have run the other way, but what used to be Audrey didn't even blink.

"Squatter's rights," said W.U.T.B.A. It wanted us to call it Ana -- Ana -- well, something like Anabaptist. Mom called it an abomination. I called it an abbreviation: Wutba.

"Give me back my daughter," said Mom. Her careful gold curls had gone frizzy, and the starch had melted out of her blouse. She had been yelling at Wutba almost since it arrived -- since she had noticed it was there, anyway. I knew about

Wutba three days before Mom did, when Audrey and I got up one day and she didn't kick me on the way to grab the bathroom first. When Wutba offered to help me with my eighth grade homework and told me all about devil worship among the French aristocrats before the Revolution, I was sure it wasn't Audrey. Audrey never helped me. It wore her face differently, too. Audrey never smiled at me when she could scowl.

Wutba stared at the knife Mom held. The knife turned a dull, pulsing red and Mom dropped it with a shriek. She ran to the kitchen sink and turned on the cold water, and then stuck her hand in the stream. The knife hissed on the floor, burning the linoleum and raising a stink. "Take warning, woman," said Wutba in three voices at once. "Threaten me at your peril." Its eyes had turned from Audrey-green to gold. Audrey's long, oil-black hair began to lift in the air around Wutba's head.

Mom rushed at me and grabbed my upper arm, and then tried to drag me out of my chair. I stood up. She pulled me into the living room of our doublewide house trailer, leaving Wutba sitting at the table in the dining nook. "Did you see what it did to me, Sherry?" she asked, stroking my hair, which is long and straight and pumpkin-colored. "How can we live with this?"

"If you're really upset, I guess you tie it to the bedposts and go get a priest," I said. Audrey-had made me watch *The Exorcist* on the Movie Channel three times, even though she knew it gave me nightmares. "I don't know, Mom. I think I like Wutba better than I like Audrey."

Mom stepped away from me, snatching her hand away from my head. She stared at me, eyes wide, and then turned and ran down the corridor to the master bedroom. I went back to the kitchen.

"Whatever *did* happen to Audrey?" I asked Wutba. I put some water in the teakettle for cocoa and got down two mugs and chocolate powder.

"She's somewhere inside me," said Wutba. It leaned over and picked up the knife Mom dropped on the floor. Then it held out a lock of Audrey's hair and chopped at it. "No edge left," it said, when the knife didn't even nick Audrey's hair. "The blade is distempered."

"How come -- how come you came?"

"A way opened," said Wutba. Its face sobered; its eyes were still gold. "I waited on the other side of shadow until the way opened." It reached up and touched Audrey's cheeks. It smiled, and then put its hand over the smile and felt the shape of its lips. "Your sister made an opening inside her, and I came to fill it."

"Are you evil?" I said. The water boiled and I poured it on the instant cocoa in the mugs.

"I don't know. I only know I am addicted to life, little Sherry." It smiled. It made Audrey's face look beautiful.

I took the cocoa mugs to the table and gave one to Wutba. I sat down.

Mom came back into the room, holding a large plastic crucifix with a glow-in-the-dark Jesus. She waved it at Wutba. Wutba smiled and sipped its cocoa. Mom pressed the cross to Wutba's forehead, but nothing happened -- no sizzle, no stench of burned flesh, hot even a cringe from Wutba. Mom dropped the cross on the table and sat down. She put her elbows on the table and rested her face on her open hands.

"Want cocoa, Mom?" I asked, pushing back my chair.

"Coffee, please," she said. Her hands formed fists, scrubbed her eyes, smearing her green eyeshadow. She took a deep breath and looked at Wutba. "What do you want?"

Wutba laid its left arm on the table, and then stroked its right hand up and down its arm, very slowly. It closed its eyes. I could almost hear it purr. "Sensations," it whispered.

Mom leaned forward. "Find an orphan to possess. I want my daughter. Give me Audrey, abomination."

"Your desire is strong, but so is Sherry's," said Wutba, opening its eyes.

Mom turned to look at me. I tucked the coffee measuring spoon under the rubber band around the jar. "Are you responsible for this?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I said. Had something heard my prayers? I used to pray a car would hit Audrey or fall over a cliff or get run down by a buffalo stampede. When she was particularly nasty to me, I imagined horrible things happening to her: aliens dissecting her, the kids she baby-sat for tying her up; sometimes I just dreamed she was smaller and weaker than I was. But I had never imagined this.

"Why would you -- Sherry -- why?" Mom said.

"Oh, Mom, you don't know what Audrey's like. You don't see what she does to me. You just see the perfect manners and the good grades and the way she helps around the house, the smiles she saves for you. You don't have to live in the same room with her. She never turns those smiles on me. Living with her is like -- like living with cancer."

"Oh, Sherry," said Mom. She put her hands on her cheeks. "How can you talk that way about your own sister? Audrey never -- no." She shook her head. Her eyes looked like wet green stones. "Audrey was my good girl." She looked at Wutba, who set down its mug and looked back.

Suddenly she was Audrey again. "Mama!" she wailed. "I'm in a dark place with things biting! It's soooo cooooold...."

Mom jumped up, her chair crashing to the floor behind her, and went to Audrey. She put her arms around her. "Oh, baby. Oh, baby," she said, and Audrey made sobbing noises, but I saw her green eyes over Mom's shoulder. She was staring at me. She looked meaner than she had the day she burned the back of my hand with a cigarette.

I crossed my fingers and closed my eyes and wished Wutba would come back, wished it so hard I started to see purple stars on the inside of my eyelids. My hands felt funny, as if something was pooling in my fingertips. The teakettle screamed. My eyes jerked open. I looked at Audrey and saw her eyes had gone golden. She was hugging Mom and grinning. I started breathing again. I turned and took the kettle off the burner, and then poured

water for Mom's coffee, the warm brown smell from the instant relaxing me like a promise that things would return to Wutba-normal.

"I'm so glad you're back, Audrey," said Mom. Then she looked at Audrey's face and saw Wutba's eyes. She screamed.

"Don't be like that," said Wutba. "I won't hurt you."

"You're torturing my daughter!"

"Nonsense. The girl is made of lies," said Wutba. "She's perfectly comfortable where she is."

"I don't believe you! She was in pain. I heard her."

Wutba smiled. It made an almost-Audrey sneer. "You begin to understand me," it said.

"Is Audrey really in pain?" I asked.

"Perhaps," said Wutba.

I-thought about that. I thought about all the times I had wished Audrey would hurt, and hurt bad. For a little while I reveled in her predicament.

"Sherry?" said Mom. "Sheryl Elizabeth MacKenzie, if you know anything you can do to get your sister back, you do it, right now!"

I looked at Mom, with her curls frizzed out, her eyeshadow smeared, her cheeks tracked by tears, and her blouse wilted. She had clenched her hands into tight hard fists. Her green eyes looked mad. I thought that she had always loved Audrey more. It wasn't fair that with Audrey gone she still loved me less. She would hate me if Wutba stayed.

I looked at Wutba. It ran its fingers through Audrey's hair, and then scratched her nose. It gave me the sort of smile Audrey only gave to Mom, a warm smile full of friendship. I thought if it could make a knife hot it could probably do a lot of things.

"Sherry!"

What if I said there was nothing I could do? Would Mom still blame me?

"Sherry."

She would never believe me. I licked my lips, squinched my eyes shut, and crossed my fingers. Then I wished with all my might Wutba would go away. I heard Mom whispering, "Our Father, who art in Heaven..." When I opened my eyes, Wutba was gone. But Audrey never really came back. She knew what I could do to her. There's someone inside her body, but I don't think it's Audrey. It doesn't kick me any more.

The Day

David Madison

David Madison's early death, by his own hand, robbed us of much excellent fantasy. He published in Dragonfields, The Diversifier, Space & Time, Dark Fantasy, Fantasy & Terror, Astral Dimensions, New Fantasy Journal, *and elsewhere. He gained a surprising reputation especially for his Marcus and Diana, wimp and amazon, heroic fantasies. Many of the M&D stories, together with pieces about Malak the Apostate (sword and sorcery's only impotent muscle-hero) will be preserved in hardcover by Celt Press (3820 Lake Trail Drive, Kenner, Louisiana 70065) in a volume entitled* Tower of Darkness: Decadent Tales of Sword and Sorcery, *probably available before* Tales by Moonlight II *is on the stands, so write to find out the price.*

His horror tales are less well remembered than his sword and sorcery and, to be honest, not of the same startling brilliance. But "The Day" struck me as that rare bird: an innovative Devil story, and reminiscent of John Collier. It is one of David's rarest items as well, having appeared only in his college newspaper in Texas about 1969.

"It is said, in a certain book written in blood, that once in an age, once in a thousand years, the stars form a pattern which is never repeated, and a day is born which is called Black Sunday. On that day is His Majesty the Devil freed from his kingdom in the pit for twenty-four hours, and during that time if he should seduce a virgin, he will father the anti-Christ who will convert the world to the worship of the Dark Master."

-- Confession (from the rack)
of Varlack the Damned

The Devil was playing chess with Jack the Ripper and had just threatened to excommunicate his bishop, when Dagon, one of the chief demons, entered the throne room. "Your Darkness," Dagon said, bowing as low as his rather peculiar anatomy would allow.

"Yes?" the Devil replied, turning to face him.

"Black Sunday will begin in twenty minutes, Your Unholiness. I have been seeing to most of the preparations."

"And the girl?"

"I think we have a winner for you," Dagon chuckled. "Observe." From a fold of his cloak, or possibly of his skin, Dagon produced a globe of fiery crystal, which he placed on the table across from the chessboard. He waved a claw at the globe, and its fiery mists parted slowly to reveal a Humphrey Bogart movie.

"Sorry, wrong channel," said Dagon, shaking the globe. "Here we are."

The crystal showed a small clear scene of a down-at-the-heels bus station. Its only occupant was a girl who looked, the Devil decided, like a cross between an undernourished owl and the jewelry counter of a five-and-dime store. Her simple child-like dress was ornamented with a great many necklaces, and her closely cropped brown hair fringed the rims of very large, round glasses. She had slender china-doll hands which were made to appear even smaller by huge baroque rings.

"This is a winner?" the Devil said vaguely.

Ignoring him, Dagon went on. "Her name is Lisa Adams. She's on vacation from college and on her way to visit a girlfriend in Texas. To the best of our knowledge she's a virgin. Her main interests are astrology, the supernatural, cats, and boys, pretty much in that order." "Go on. I'm beginning to be interested." "She's feeling a little lonely and vaguely sorry for herself right now because it's been a very long ride and doesn't show any sign of coming

to an end. Also, her horoscope said she'd make a new Mend today and so far he hasn't shown up."

"He will."

"You should arrive there at midnight, a few minutes before her bus connection shows up, and, Your Majesty, may I wish you luck."

"You may, and I'll probably need it."

Dagon handed the Devil his bus tickets, slightly scorched, and he rose to leave the throne room. Pausing with his hand on the door, he turned back to Jack the Ripper and threatened him with something quite remarkable, even in Hell, if he should move any of the chessmen during his absence.

He appeared in front of the bus station to discover that it was pouring rain. He hadn't remembered to bring an umbrella, being from somewhere that rain was notably absent, and was drenched in a moment. Stepping under a tattered, flapping awning, he looked at his reflection in a cracked window. He didn't look at all like the pictures of him, but then the people who illustrate Bibles are inclined to be prejudiced. His hair was blond and long, slightly curling around the edges. He had green eyes and the flawless complexion of a porcelain doll.

The bent glass-and-aluminum door creaked open under his hand, and he stepped into the high-ceilinged waiting room that smelled of age and damp. "Hi," Lisa said brightly, glad for the company. "Hell of a night isn't it?"

"You can say that again," he replied, smiling at the private joke. He sat down on the sagging couch beside her, and she drew her feet up under her and turned to face him.

"My name's Lisa Adams. What's your?"

"Devlin. Mark Devlin, and I'm pleased to meet you."

She offered him a hand to shake, which he kissed. "Oh, wow!" she giggled. "I didn't think anybody did that anymore."

"I still do. I think it's a lovely custom."

"And you get to taste of lot of nice hands, too. Where are you going to?"

"A one-horse town named Crooked River."

"I don't believe it! That's where I'm going, too. That's fantastic!"

There was a flicker of lights and a squeal of protesting brakes. "I think our bus is here," Mark said.

The two of them walked to the door. The bus was parked on the opposite side of the street which was an, at least, ankle-deep river of very dirty rainwater. "You don't happen to have a rowboat with you by any chance?" Lisa asked.

The driver opened the door of the bus and motioned for them to hurry. "I don't have a boat, but I do have a strong back. May I?" Looping the strap of her purse over his shoulder, he carefully picked her up in his arms and carried her across.

The bus was like a cool, dark cave in the rainy night, and they were the only passengers. Mark had a feeling that Dagon might have had something to do with that. Sitting together on the couch-like rear seats, they shared sandwiches and sips from a bottle of wine that Lisa had in her outsized purse, talking softly about anything and everything.

Lisa fell asleep with her head in his lap.

They had breakfast in a cafe in the middle of nowhere -- Nowhere was a small town south of Abeline -- and moved on.

They kissed for the first time in a city zoo under the disinterested gaze of a tiger.

According to Mark's watch it was nine o'clock, three hours before midnight and the end of Black Sunday, when the bus broke down. The driver and his two passengers looked at the smoking engine dismally.

"Looks like we dropped the oil pan," the driver said. "Thing like this could take eight or ten hours to get fixed."

"And just what are we supposed to do for eight or ten hours?" Lisa asked sarcastically.

"Do whatever you want. It's none of my business," he said with an ugly smirk.

Mark told him where he could go, which was something he usually couldn't do since everyone he knew was already there, and he and Lisa walked away.

"What are we going to do, Mark?" she asked. "I'm so tired I can't see straight."

He put his arm around her. "You must really be worn out, poor baby. There's a motel across the street. Why don't we get a room, and you can rest until they fix the bus."

"A room, as in one room for the two of us."

"With twin beds, of course."

"That's better. I always knew you were a gentleman."

Lisa kicked off her shoes and sprawled on one of the wide white beds while Mark hung out the Do Not Disturb sign. "Mr. and Mrs. Mark Devlin," she giggled. "That has a nice ring to it."

"Well, I could hardly have told the clerk, 'Mr. Devlin and Miss Adams,' at least not in this part of the country." He sat down beside her on the edge of the bed. Taking hold of her hand, he leaned over, kissed her lightly, and whispered a suggestion in her ear. She sat up, looking rather sad.

"I'd love to, Mark, I really would, but I'm afraid you have to leave," she said.

"I have to what?"

"Leave. I guess it wouldn't be fair if I didn't tell you that I know who you are. I have known for quite a while."

"But how?"

"I told you I study astrology. I knew this was Black Sunday, and I found out about you when you were carrying me out of the bus station. You stepped in a patch of mud, and the footprint you left was a cloven hoof."

"But Lisa... We still have three hours.... Couldn't we..."

"I'm sorry. I knew if I gave you a chance, you'd be able to talk me into it, and I'm not really ready to become a mother, so while you were asleep, I set your watch back three hours. It's almost midnight now."

"In spite of this, it's been wonderful."

She took him in her arms. "It really has. If only you weren't who you are..." The clock struck even as their lips met. It was like kissing a wisp of fog.

She cried a little after he was gone.

In the first light of morning, Lisa walked up the steps of the newly repaired bus. "Where's your friend?" the driver asked.

"He had to leave."

"Too bad. We picked up a new passenger, though. I think he lives in that little town you're going to."

Lisa walked down the aisle to where the dark-haired, handsome young man was sitting. "Hi," she said brightly. "I hear you live in Crooked River."

Her horoscope hadn't lied after all. She was going to make a new friend.

A Thief in the Night

Jayge Carr

Jayge Carr, with a degree in physics, writes chiefly in the area of science fiction. Leviathan's Deep *from Doubleday was the first of several novels. She occasionally writes fantasy as well, as the present story shows. "A Thief in the Night" is from the fantasy issue of Canada's* Room of One's Own, *a leading feminist little magazine. That issue was guest-edited by the late Susan Wood, a Hugo Award winner for her fan writing. Many literary journals, including those with special feminist focus, have had f/sf issues and offer a sprinkling of supernatural fiction in regular issues.*

> *Jayge Carr has contributed to small fantasy and horror magazines as well, including* Bloodrake, Fantasy Book, *and* Whispers.

The three sisters had lived together a long time, and each worked at her appointed task, in companionable silence. Their house curled, long and low, amid majestic trees. Built of native wood and rock, it seemed not so much to blend with its surroundings as to have grown there, a natural part of the environment.

One long wall of the comfortable workroom was glass, open now to a subtly scented informal garden, shimmering in the moonlight. Within, more light was provided by a number of oil lamps and a cheerful, crackling fire on the hearth. Before the fire, a marmalade torn sprawled bonelessly on a bright rag rug. From time to time he stretched and lazily washed a paw, or flopped over to a more comfortable position. The only sounds in the room were the low night-songs from the garden, the snapping of the fire, the whirr of the eldest sister's spinning wheel, the click of shuttle and heddle from the second sister's loom, and the rustle of clothing as the youngest sister busied herself at small quiet tasks, winding yarn, laying out threads

for the pattern online loom, or snipping a loose thread with her shining silver shears.

The thief eased himself through the unlocked window and gazed around the moonlit, lovingly furnished bedroom with avid glee.

Jeez, whatta piece a' cake! An ol' stone fence a kid could hop over, and the house itself isolated by its huge estate. What'd three nutty ol' women want with all this nature stuff -- dingbats, the three of 'em, no TV antennas, no wires, even. But ol' biddies like these oughtta have plenty stashed away somewhere. Money. Jewelry. Who-knew-what.

He jerked the Tree-of-Life patterned quilt from the bed, proved its softness, slashing it here and there with a careless disregard of its exquisitely tiny hand-stitching, until he was sure it concealed no goodies.

Snarling, he flung the ruined remnants in a corner.

The pillow yielded only feathers; he had to suppress a fit of coughing.

He lifted the mattress, glared at the rope web underneath, slapped it back down, and, like a pathologist making his first incision, drew the long knife down it from top to bottom.

Jeez, nutty ol' biddies, sleepin' on dried grass^

A pungent spicy smell filled the room, softened by rosemary, sweetened by mint. His hands searched and thrust through the rustling, scratchy dryness.

Jeez, it couldn't be *real* grass, could it?

He crumbled a bit of it between his fingers, smelt deeply.

Na! Jist plain ol' grass! Those rotten ol' --

With mounting fury and frustration, he tackled the crowded but neat table and dresser tops, the drawers, the closets, all filled with the pretty but worthless mementos sentimental old women are likely to save.

Hadda be lotsa loot 'round here someplace! All tha stories he'd heard 'bout them three ol' witches --

If there wasn't nothin' in the bedrooms, maybe he'd see what he could squeeze outta the ol' bats themselves, Handle'm easy with only die knife. But -- he hated to leave witnesses -- have the pigs on his trail -- worse if he murdered --

He was young, cruelly handsome as a new-risen god, born in poverty, raised in ignorance, thrust out too soon into an indifferent world. But he was smart, yes, he was, he congratulated himself. Who else would have listened to all those stories, thrown out the obvious fairy tales, and spotted the golden opportunity? The rich, eccentric old ladies, not even a phone to call for help.

Jeez, why worry 'bout the pigs? If anything -- happened -- to those three, it'd be days, weeks before the pigs even realized -- or maybe a fire -- burn all that evidence -- laugh at that, stupid pigs -- yeah, laugh --

Yeah, burn -- *everything* --

Laugh --

The sisters worked on unknowing, their silver hair braided in regal coronets, their skilled fingers flashing almost faster than mere eye could follow.

"Mrrrrrrow!" The cat sat up, gave warning.

"Why, look at Charon," said the youngest, short and plumpish, everyone's ideal grandmother, her fingers never pausing in winding a great ball of yarn.

"What can be amiss?" wondered the eldest, tiny yet imperial.

"I think -- do you hear something, in the bedrooms?" asked the middle sister, tall and elegant, long, slender fingers busy at her loom.

"Perhaps," the youngest laid aside her ball of yarn and cocked her head. She rose, and moved to stand behind the loom. "There's a flaw in your pattern,

sister." Her finger tapped the cloth, just beneath the shuttle, gently.

"You're right, sister. A grievous flaw. Shall I reweave?"

The door to the bedroom hall crashed open, the thief, knife in hand, stalked into the room. "All right, ladies," he growled. "Nobody makes no trouble, nobody gets hurt." His eyes glinted brighter than jewels on necks, wrists, and ears. "We'll start with *you."* His free hand reached toward the eldest, seated at her wheel.

"You haven't time, sister," said the youngest. "I'll just snip it off." Her silver shears flashed in the firelight as she carefully snipped one thread in the intricate pattern.

Lightning flashed, too, out of the clear night sky. Its unbearable brightness was the last thing the thief ever saw.

"You'll have to reweave a bit, anyway, I fear," said the youngest.

"My fault, my fault entirely, sisters," said the weaver. "I don't know how I could have been so careless. After so many years, too."

The marmalade cat paced around the rug three times, and then settled back.

"My, Charon seems active tonight," said the eldest.

"As long as I was trimming loose ends," the youngest murmured.

"This room must be properly cleansed," the eldest said, her fingers never faltering.

“One of us can fetch the flamens, in the morning," said the weaver.

"They call them policemen here, dearest," said the youngest.

"Whatever."

"Our bedrooms, too," the eldest frowned.

"Oh, sister," the youngest pleaded, "the night is so warm -- "

"Like the old country," added the weaver.

"And the moon so full -- "

The eldest tried to be stern, and then smiled. "Just this once, sisters. Mind you now, just this once."

"Thank you, sister." The youngest's round cheeks grew red with joy.

"Thank you, sister," the weaver said, and then added, sighing, "my poor pattern. *So* careless of me." Another sigh. "I must be getting old."

"All of us, dearest sister." The eldest, smiling, turned back to her work.

To his dying day, the police chief could never understand how a man could be electrocuted in a house a mile from the nearest wires, on a clear, cloudless night. Well, he shrugged to himself, small loss. Saves us the cost of a trial. Besides, his wife liked the sweet, harmless old ladies, who were always ready to contribute handcrafts for bazaars and charities. He filed the case away.

The sisters smiled quietly, and took up again the interrupted threads of their lives. They had, after all, lived together a *very* long time.

Silhouette

D. Beckett

A graphically superior, fantastically boring newspaper published here in the Northwest for liberal yuppies ran an ad for a volume of short stories entitled Paradise Plus: Tales of Another Life *available from the author. The ad was just askew enough that I was intrigued. The volume in magazine format turned out to be one of the best things I'd seen in a while, a combination of* film noir *sentiment and occult surrealism. ' 7 was not intending to be weird or surreal; to me they were merely stories," Don Beckett told me. "Come to think of it, many things that seem ordinary to me are considered supernatural by the general populace." The present selection is the collection's most horrifically appealing.*

I

Charles Gordon was an incurable optimist, and meticulously meticulous. He lived in a brown stone house on Pleasant Street. (Someone else -- in New York or Chicago, for instance -- might have called the house a brownstone, but Charles Gordon didn't like brownstone houses, had never like brownstone houses, and so this was simply a brown stone house.)

Meticulous, yes. And an optimist. So what brought Charles to the hospital? He certainly had no love for hospitals; he didn't believe in hospitals. What brought him there, on a sunny August afternoon, to be stuck in bed with a plastic tube in his arm? It was a question, which could be answered in at least two ways.

According to Charles's housekeeper, it was *she* who brought him to the hospital; and, on the surface, this was undoubtedly true. But Charles saw the housekeeper as merely the mechanism: the actual force behind his trip to the hospital was

Margaret.

The housekeeper, of course, had her own viewpoint. In the first place, Charles was eccentric (anyone as meticulous as Charles was bound to seem eccentric to this kid, being the sorority girl that she was). She admired eccentricity up to a point, but Charles had begun to worry her: he had all but given up eating. His food intake had come to consist of fresh coconuts and egg roll skins -- nothing more.

Even worse, Charles was very matter-of-fact about the whole thing. "Why do they call them *skins,* anyway?" he asked her one day, as he was frying up a batch. "Egg roll *skins* -- it's not very appetizing. Egg roll *wrappers* would be much more appropriate, don't you think?"

"I don't really know."

"Well, the recipe calls them *skins.* Right here in the Chinese cookbook -- look at this."

"I guess they should know," said the housekeeper.

What could she do? She tried to get him to eat. She even baked him a meatloaf and left it in his refrigerator -- until it sprouted.

He had always been thin, and was rapidly getting thinner. He would sit in his rocking chair, rocking gently, smoking his pipe, occasionally nibbling a strip of fresh coconut; and she could practically watch him evaporating. So, finally, she didn't know what to do except take him to the hospital.

"I really think you should go," she told him. "Let them find out what's wrong."

"But there is nothing wrong."

"Then why aren't you eating?"

"Because I'm not hungry."

"And why aren't you hungry?"

"Because I'm not."

"Well, there has to be a reason."

"Entropy," he said. "Look it up." He knew that would confuse her. Actually, his loss of appetite was just the most recent development in a long-developing pattern: Charles had been giving up things for years. In high school he had given up swimming, archery, and butterfly collecting, all of which he had dearly loved as a child (mere must have been other things, too, which he had entirely forgotten). In college he gave up drawing and painting. A few years later he had more or less given up women, and then alcohol. Then he had given up housework, hired this sorority girl. So it was only a matter of time until the natural progression brought him to the point of phasing out food. His attention was coming to rest increasingly on Margaret.

"I'm taking you to the hospital," said the housekeeper, putting the dictionary back on the desk. "I mean it, now get ready."

Charles was stuffing his pipe with tobacco. "I'm not paying you to make decisions. I'm paying you to dust." He stared her down; she went back to dusting.

But then it occurred to him that the hospital had some connection with Margaret. Could this be the mechanism for bringing the two of them together? Charles would never have considered this on his own; hospitals were so far out of his realm, they might as well not have existed. But now, suddenly, the hospital seemed very important -- and it seemed that the housekeeper's part in this whole puzzle might be simply to take him there. He contrived, after all, to let himself be persuaded.

He arrived in the waiting room with a long red robe and a toothbrush, and the picture of Margaret that he always kept by his bed. He didn't have a doctor, so the housekeeper called hers: a Dr. Anderson.

"I don't know how you're still on your feet," said the doc. "You're going right to bed."

They put him in a room on the third floor: a private room, at Charles's request. On the night table he set up the picture of Margaret, and then made himself comfortable in the motorized bed; inclined, gazing out the windows to the west. A nurse (with nicotine stains on her fingernails) came in and plugged a bottle of glucose into his arm and took his temperature. He was left alone then, until the next morning.

In the morning the interrogation began. Doc Anderson came in, stethoscope swinging from around his neck. He stood at the bedside, hands in his black pants pockets. "Well. How are we doing this morning?"

Charles didn't answer, except with a patronizing smile. Doc was already moving to the chair, sitting down, looking at the picture on the table. "Nice-looking girl. Who is she?" "Her name is Margaret."

"Looks like an old picture." (Very observant, these doctors.) "Nineteen twenty-two," said Charles. "Some relation of yours?" "She was my wife."

Doc's eyes came up from the picture to look at Charles. One eyebrow lifted itself sarcastically (as if to say: "All right, Son -- how gullible do you think I am, anyway?").

Charles lifted an eyebrow in return ("You shouldn't ask questions unless you're willing to accept the answers, Doc.") "Mister Gordon, how old are you?" "Uhh... what year is this?"

"Well, I'm under the *impression,"* said the doc -- rubbing at a stain on his stethoscope -- "that we're in the *vicinity* of nineteen eighty-four."

"Well, and then... I must be thirty-three." "And you say this picture was..." "Nineteen twenty-two."

Doc pulled a pair of half-glasses from somewhere, put them on, and glared over the top at Charles. "Mister Gordon, how would you describe yourself physically? Your weight, in particular -- are you happy with it, or maybe... a little overweight? Mister Gordon?"

"I'm not *anorectic,* if that's what you're thinking." "You let *me* be the judge of that, Young Man." "For one thing, Doctor... *anorexia* is unheard of in men. But I'm sure you're aware of that."

"Well, of course. There's no need for jumping to conclusions, Mister Gordon. I was merely asking a question -- and I would appreciate you merely answering it. Now, how would you describe yourself physically? Please?"

"Well... I would say that my physical condition at this point could fairly be described as *Skinny as a Rail,* due to the fact that I have eaten nothing but egg roll skins and coconuts for the past few weeks!" That ended the interrogation.

//

Mar-gie...I'm always thinking of you
Mar-gie...I'll tell the world I love you
Don't forget your promise to me...[1].

Margie was coming back. She was very close, he could feel it. He lay propped up in bed, looking out the window, playing games with a cloud on the horizon. He was vaporizing the top of the cloud -- whittling it down with his thoughts -- when he saw Margaret’s face. It wasn't the face he had known before. The eyes were the same, but the face was different. He closed his eyes and tried to sustain the image.

Mar-gie...I'm always thinking of you

Mar-gie...

"That's a pretty song." It was the nurse; he hadn't heard her come in.

He stopped singing. "Yes -- it's an old one. From the Twenties."

"Aren't you going to eat any of your lunch?"

"I did. I ate the crackers."

"That's all you want?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Well, how are we going to put any weight on you if you won't eat?"

Charles refrained from answering. Maybe, if he stayed very still and didn't open his eyes, he could get her to leave.

When she went, she sneaked out on her white crepe soles. Charles didn't hear a thing; he only felt her absence. These nurses were as sneaky as cats. Always sneaking in and out.

Oh, well -- all that mattered was that Margie was coming back. And he knew what she looked like; he would know her when he saw her. Pulling the sheet up over his face, he felt wonderfully smug.

///

After all is said and done
There is really only one
Oh! Mar-gie, Mar-gie, it's you

He was standing at the window. It was dusk. The window was open, pulling smoke from his cigarette out through the screen.

A nurse came into the room and stopped -- gawking at the empty bed and the I.V. tube hanging in the air, dripping glucose on the sheet. "Where's Mister Gordon?" she demanded.

"Excuse me?" (Sneaky bitches; always sneaking around.)

She looked at him more closely, finally recognized the red robe. "Mister Gordon?"

He turned back to the window.

"What are you doing? What *are* you *doing?* And where did you get that cigarette? Give me mat." She took it away from him, not knowing what to do with it herself. "Mister Gordon, are you... ?" He looked older -- and *different.* "Mister Gordon?"

"Please, call me Ned." The voice was different, too; slightly British.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting. For Margaret."

"Oh, that's nice. Wouldn't you rather wait in bed?"

"Certainly not." He gestured to the window. "Look out there, it's twilight. It's the best part of the day."

"Yes. I see. Uhh... tell me, who is Margaret? I guess I've forgotten."

"Well, I don't believe I ever told you. She was my wife." "You say *was* -- *you* mean you're divorced?" "No. She killed herself... and me, too." "Uhh... what do you mean?"

"I mean she killed us both. With a knife."

"But you're not dead, you're standing right here."

"Oh, I'm dead enough all right. Neddie's dead." He turned from the window, rubbing a thumb against his chest. "This is no more than an empty silhouette. Like those trees out there, look at them, turning into silhouettes. We're all silhouettes of what we were before."

The nurse sat down on the bed. "Wouldn't you like to sit here and rest?" When he didn't answer, she said: "Well, tell me about your wife. When were you married?"

"Nineteen twenty-two. Twentieth day of May."

"Tell me about it."

"Well... the marriage was a riotous joke from the beginning. Not that we weren't in love, we certainly were that, but... well, the marriage never had a snowball's chance in Hell. It was a very stupid thing. It lasted seventeen years, but you wouldn't have known we were married most of that time. She spent a good deal of it running around -- very taken with different men. More or less constantly."

"It was very strange -- to say the least -- because she was a Catholic, you see. Very dogmatic, for the most part. That was why we got married -- at her insistence, because of the Church. And we spent seventeen years like that."

He turned to face the nurse, looked at her hands on the bed. "You're not married?"

"No."

"Not a Catholic?" She shook her head. He nodded, went back to the window: "You see, the Church would forgive you for having an affair with every bounder that passed through the neighborhood... but they *wouldn't* forgive you for not being married -- I mean, living with someone out of wedlock. So that was how it went."

He was talking to the twilight. "The God-damned Church, the bastards. They were the ones that finally sent her over the edge, of course. And God-damned if she didn't take me with her." He forced a laugh, glancing back toward the nurse.

"The way it finally came about... she fell for this other chap, you see. After seventeen years of falling for other chaps. I mean, she had it bad for this one. They had a go at it for a while, and then he was going to leave. Well – she couldn't stand him to go, not this one. But he was going, and not a bleedin' thing she could do about it, you see.

"She couldn't run off with him. She couldn't marry him, because she couldn't divorce me, because of the Church. Marriage was completely sacred... so there she was. Nothing she could do, and this fellow was leaving. He did leave -- and something in Margaret came undone. Could I have my cigarette back, please?"

The nurse let him take it. This was getting interesting, even if he was crazy.

"Would you have a match?"

She found one in her pocket, lit the cigarette for him. He nodded a thank you, and shuffled back to the window.

"The day it happened," he said, "1 was down in the cellar. I must've taken something down -- we used the cellar for general storage, plus as a pantry -- and I was starting to come back up. And the place was so full; there was just a narrow aisle alongside the wall. You went along next to the wall, round the end of it, and up the stairs.

"I was coming along, almost to the end of the wall, just ready to turn the corner -- and there she was. Like something out of a nightmare. Wearing a satin slip -- very slinky affair. No shoes, nor anything else. I hadn't even heard her on the stairs.

"Her hair was pulled straight back and tied, and you could tell by her face -- by her eyes -- that she was quite gone. Mad as a hatter. I saw the eyes

before I saw the knife, she was so close. Right there face to face, coming round the end of the wall."

His voice was mesmerizing the nurse.

"I suppose I knew right then what was about to happen. Like turning the last page of a book, and already knowing what's there. And it didn't really bother me; it was just something that was very clearly going to happen.

"I remember saying her name. 'Margaret.' I don't remember actually feeling the knife, isn't that odd? There she was hacking bloody hell out of my chest, and I was watching her do it, and I don't remember *feeling* it! But the *smell* of it -- so heavy, you could *taste* in the air! That smothering, metallic taste! I suppose it's the iron in the blood -- is that what it is?"

He looked at the nurse, but she didn't answer.

"I remember lying there on the floor... and seeing her back away from me. Seeing her crouched in the corner, at the bottom of the stairs. Blood everywhere. All over her slip, on her face, on the floor." He scraped the cigarette ash against the window screen and watched it blow away.

"It seemed that she didn't move for the longest time -- just crouched there. And then the sound that came out of her, *God in Heaven!* All the poor souls in Hell couldn't make a sound like that! Like something you'd hear at the end of the world! There's nothing to compare with it....

"And she went right over onto the knife... and then the sound of the knife handle scraping on the concrete floor, and then stopping."

He was beginning to shake; took a huge drag on the cigarette. "The irony of the thing, you know: here was this brilliant woman... *magnificent* woman! Beautiful, and talented, and funny -- she was a nightclub singer, which was crazy enough in itself -- and a prisoner of the Catholic church.

"I mean, the *idiocy* of not being able to get a divorce because of the Church, and then to end up *killing* herself -- the most unforgivable sin of all! Driven to it by those pompous, moronic *bastards!"*

The nurse got up, stood behind him at the window, put her hands on his shoulders. "That's a beautiful story -- I mean... a sad one."

"She's coming back," he said. "She's very close right now."

"Here -- let's get you back in bed. You'll get a chill, standing here with that window open. And let me have the cigarette, all right?"

IV

The moon woke him. No one had shut the curtains. It must have been two or three in the morning; he didn't know which day.

He tried sitting up in bed. Sitting up, sitting up -- it was taking forever. The room was a sequence of still pictures, like individual frames of a movie, and the pictures were barely changing. Just sitting up seemed endless.

It was the moonlight: it wasn't continuous. The moon was a strobe light, breaking every movement into countless components.

Sitting up, finally; getting the tube out of his arm; it was agony. Out of bed. Moving for the window. Not getting anywhere.

Seeing the moon through the window -- and seeing it and seeing it. *Tic tic tic tic;* glucose dripping into a pool on the sheet. *Tic tic tic:* the pictures were all the same now, the same picture, over and again, over and again. Frozen.

Then he knew where he was (he heard nurses talking in the hall). He was in the hospital. He pulled himself away from the moon, got out into the hall, and things were continuous again. Green and white squares of tile, making nice continuous diagonals on the floor. He started walking.

"Getting some exercise," he said to the woman at the nurse's station.

"Good," she said. "It's good for you."

He took the elevator down to the first floor. He was feeling all right again; he would find a newspaper and a place to sit.

Two young men in white uniforms, wheeling a cart, were coming out the doors marked SURG. PREP. Someone was on the cart, under a green sheet, covered from head to foot.

"A dead one?" said Charles.

"Not quite."

"What happened?" He started walking with them, back past the elevators.

"A lovers' quarrel. Boyfriend beat the hell out of her."

There was a hand poking out from under the sheet: a nice, broken hand. Looking at it, Charles thought the still pictures were going to start again -- *tic tic* -- and he already knew who was under the sheet. But then he got himself under control.

Still walking alongside, he reached for the corner of the sheet, to lift it. "May I?"

"I wouldn't recommend it."

"But I have to." He pulled it back and recognized the face, terrible as it was. He watched the men wheel her into Surgery.

When they came out with the empty cart, Charles was sitting formlessly in the hallway; propped against the wall like a pile of soggy newspapers. "Just resting," he said, and motioned for the men to go away.

He sat thinking about the white uniforms and the green sheet; the feel of the green sheet between his fingers.

Two doctors marching past in the hall: "... then if you'll cover for me Thursday..." "Sure. And Clifford will take the weekend..."

"Doctor Spanner, call Five-four-one, please. Doctor Spanner, Five-four-one."

When the doors to Surgery opened, a nurse came out, went off down the hall, all but running. Another woman, apparently a surgeon, walked over to Charles. He took her hand and she helped him up.

"You knew her?" the woman said.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. She's gone."

They walked along together, toward the elevators. "Well," Charles said, "I'll just have to start over. We'll both have to start over, that's all." He wasn't going to let this get him down, not after coming this close. If Charles was anything, he was an optimist.

Laugh Kookaberry, Laugh Kookaberry,
Gay Your Life Must Be

John Domini

> *The richest area for supernatural tales is the hardest to keep track of: publishers who aren't specialized and don't want to let on that they're issuing first-rate fantasy in single-author collections. L. W. Michaelson's* On My Being Dead *(Galileo); Jacques Perron's* Selected Stories *(Anansi); John Richard's* The Pigeon Factory *(Cadmus); Merce Rodoreda's* My Christina *(Graywolf); Renee Vivien's* The Woman of the Wolf *(Gay Press); Steve Katz'* Stolen Stories *(Fiction Collective); Jack Schaefer's* Conversations with a Pocket Gopher *and Leonora Carrington's* The Oval Lady *(Capra); Paul Bowles* Collected Stories *(Black Sparrow); Mary McDermott Shideler's* Mother and the Flying Saucer *(Pegana); Lou V. Crabtree's* Sweet Hollow *(Louisiana State University Press); and scores more. Selected from John Domini's Fiction International volume* Bedlam is *a mere sampling of the excellence found in small presses considered ' 'mainstream," as though there were any such thing. Domini is an Oregon college professor. He has contributed to leading literary magazines such as* Ploughshares *and* The Paris Review.

Much later on, long after Judgment Day, we remembered that a man had once passed through here and then returned, still living, to the world. Across

the lightning and malefic smoke of Hell the news traveled. A human man! Only *passing through!*

Among all my fellow devils the one I most often conversed with, at this time of the news of the escaped man, was a polymorph named Miplip. I had no choice about talking with him. He was my overseer. In his natural state he possessed a hideous face: scaly, pendulous cheeks, and a long nose with a circular tip and the nostrils on the tip. I had heard it said that the inspiration for his looks came from an ancient river turtle of South America, but this of course could not be, for Miplip had been created eons before either the turtle or the river in which, until Judgment Day, the creature had made its home.

He was my overseer. Still, still it rankles. In our Division there was Miplip and I, only we two, though there were visitors, and he -- he was the one in charge. Everywhere devils work in twos; one must be in charge. Then why should it hurt so? Miplip, Miplip. Our relationship was oppressive.

Why did you argue with me, perpetually shaking your brittle cheeks? They made a rustling sound, and anyway I conceded every point, sooner or later. Why the heartless flaunting of your superiority? I concede: you have all the advantages. Don't you think we have been at it together long enough for me to know? I concede that your tongue is longer than mine and that the inside of your mouth is a nastier yellow. I concede that your polymorphism dwarfs anything I am capable of. Then why should I be reminded, again and again? *Miplip.* The nagging. The nicknames. The shapes you sometimes assumed, just to delude me. The jokes far over my head. The remarks to others. Everywhere devils work in twos, and one must be in charge. Therefore I needed you; I could never be in charge. But what did you need, to cause me such pain?

Yet Miplip and I, like all the other devils, discussed this new development (or rather, this newly remembered old development): a man who had slipped our grasp and returned to the world unharmed. On some occasions Miplip and I were lucky; our conversation would be more of a discussion and less of a harangue. On other occasions, unlucky, the reverse. But we did talk, like all the others, and we asked those demons who came by what they thought. The general response was confused, halting, and even pessimistic.

Some avoided the question altogether, darting away before we had finished so much as a single sentence about the escaped man. A troubling situation, especially in the light of all the other worries we had been suffering recently. Then came the day that one of our regular visitors, a sightless demon whom Miplip and I both regarded as a friend, rendered himself invisible in order to escape us. After that, Miplip made a suggestion -- a suggestion, as it turned out, of monumental proportions.

He had his tail curled about him at the time, and he sat on the air, maintaining levitation by a gentle flapping of his wings. He seemed unusually subdued. The blind devil's exertions in bursting out of sight had left a brown stain on the air, just over Miplip's head.

"Lover," my overseer began quietly, though he was using one of his most offensive nicknames for me, "no one knows who this passerby was, as yet?"

"No one, Miplip." I stood on a boulder nearby, disconsolately knocking off flinders with my fork into the damned below. That particular nickname, Lover, is so offensive to me because it is so duplicit. "But I have heard he had a guide, someone from among those already dead in his time. Yes, I think this is generally accepted as true now. He had a guide, from Limbo, just above us."

"From Limbo."

"A non-Christian. Surely *you* know."

I was pleased to be one up on him, and not a little surprised. But instead of sneering and challenging my news he continued to sit where he was, in silence. The brown stain faded and disappeared. When at last Miplip spoke, it was thoughtfully:

"We could make use of this man, Lover. The mere mention of him might make an excellent torture."

I left off swinging at the chips of rock and turned to face him. "Look here, Miplip, it seems to me that 'the mere mention' of a human being who got away would be joyful news to these souls."

To debate with him was pointless; innumerable experiences had taught me that I lacked even the* shadow of a particle of a maggot of hope. *He had won every argument since Lucifer's Fall.* And yet... once again I experienced the wretched excitement, the stirring of a spirit that will not be held still, the baffling resurgence of -- what *was* it? It overwhelmed me, every time Miplip and I began to heave our opinions back and forth. Uselessly I struggled to keep quiet and let him say what he had to say. That scrambling monotony inside me took over. In the thrill of discovering that there were *two points of view here,* Miplip's and my own, an eternity of lost arguments dropped out of my memory. In other words, I became an idiot.

"You *say* Miplip!" I shouted, banging the heel of my fork on the boulder. "You say he will cause pain?"

At that Miplip shook off his introspection. He laughed derisively, showing the yellow inside of his mouth. It was a nastier yellow than my own, and his tongue was much longer.

"Lover 'You *say?'* What do you say, Little Gash? You have an idea? *You* are thinking? I doubt it, Cunt. Listen to me."

At least I am not alone in my miserable enthusiasm for arguing. Debate is the most avidly pursued activity in Hell. This is not an exaggeration. I have never seen two devils get together and not immediately take up some pro and con to occupy their leisure time. If a third demon joins them, he will find a middle ground suitable for contention. Miplip, too, took obvious pleasure in it -- devastatingly obvious.

"Now, Lover, see if you can follow what I am saying. I will use small words. I will pronounce them slowly. How..."

"Miplip, I have a mind as good as yours!"

I was an idiot.

"Blasphemer!" my overseer cried. "And the One in the ice below? Your vocabulary is equal to His?"

I kicked the rock beneath me. Miplip assumed a commiserating look.

"Dear boy, who was put in charge here?"

I looked down, and scratched and pawed for a moment or two, but finally I pointed at my overseer with the handle of my fork.

"Who, boy?"

I unwrapped one finger from around the handle and pointed it, too, at him. I had no one else to appeal to, no one else at all.

"Well, all right, since we are not speaking. Now perhaps you could show me who -- or Who -- set me in charge."

With my free hand I pointed downward, exaggeratedly and repeatedly. One should never be uncertain about Who is running the show.

"Lover, I hope I have made my point clear? Well, yes? So then, small words: How... do... you... know... what... our... pri-son-ers... think? Can... you... hear... them?"

He then outlined for me the main points of his amazing suggestion.

The great problem in Hell is that since the Last Day we have been incapable of communicating with the souls under our jurisdiction. Before the trumpet blew, when they were all merely spirits like us, we could hear their screams, their lamentations, their boasts, their pleas, and their empty threats. When we wished to, we could speak with them. But the reunion with their bodies, though it went off without a hitch, spoiled all that.

As was the plan, at the Final Reckoning the numberless hosts of the damned were reinserted in the bodies they had worn on earth and then one by one hurled back down into his or her designated area of the Pit and locked away from the face of God forever. I watched from the far left-hand corner of the assembly; even at that distance it was an impressive spectacle. The excruciating mental torment of that fall! And the physical pain of the landing! And then to waken, not only still alive but never to die again, never

even to sleep, on a desert beneath rains of fire... or in the putrid slime... or the burning ice....

A masterful plan. In all the debating I have heard, never once has anyone disputed the beautiful piece of work that was Judgment Day. But then I am consigned to one Division here; it would be incorrect of me to speak for all demons and all Hell.

Thus the infinite project began well, and it was a long time before our confidence eroded, even so little as to allow us to notice that we could no longer hear what our charges were saying. Did a demon think he recognized a certain body and try to torment it with questions rather than his fork? Did the problem suddenly dawn on that far-sighted devil -- some smart bastard like Miplip -- as he saw his scarred or mutilated or burning victim's mouth open and close soundlessly? I myself can remember reflecting, very long ago, that something seemed to be missing. Yet I admit, I concede, that the situation remained mystifying to me until Miplip explained it. For once, he did not claim complete authorship: he acknowledged that the information came not straight from him but from the demons guarding the monstrous City of Dis, where the Heretics are kept. Miplip is allowed to descend that far; my own limit is higher.

Our first reaction was to go at our tasks with renewed energy. It is not necessary to hear screams in order to know a body is in pain. We put aside our quarreling and, for immeasurable ages, spoke only to suggest some new kind of mercilessness, or to point out those we had missed. But at length our confidence ebbed still lower. We were simply not getting the proper response. Miplip might change into a huge, furious wasp, stinging at will, but the reaction would be little more than a slight agitation. And was that a smile -- *a smile* -- *I* sometimes saw on the faces of those unlucky humans I now and again hoisted high into the air and then let fall, down to the rocky floor of Hell? A smile?

I never had a body and so have no way of knowing its capacities, but Miplip was one of the many who had worked temporary assignments on earth combating the forces of righteousness and faith. He wondered (and, of course, bullied me into wondering as well) if there were not limits to physical suffering. He postulated "the development of an anticipatory

psychological uplift," and "deprivation of pleasurable stimuli," by which devious phrases he meant, in so far as he let me penetrate his meaning, that whatever pain we inflicted was, with the passage of tinie, *wearing off.* In fact, Miplip feared that we might even be giving our prisoners some small measure of happiness.

There followed a concerted attempt to learn to read the lips of the damned. We received the orders from the City of Dis. For centuries Miplip and I howled and roared at the damned, the idea being that, one of them might shout back at us in words we could understand. But our verbal abuse elicited no more than a perfunctory response; the attempt failed everywhere. The variety of human languages and the vastness of time since any devil had heard human speech proved obstacles too great to overcome.

And now came this awful news about the human passerby. As if we needed anything more to make us feel impotent, outsmarted, and ridiculous! The existence of such a person certified our deficiency.

Thus it was a low and worrying moment in our history, when Miplip made his suggestion. Smart, Miplip, very smart. But doubtless, as had been the case previously, bright fiends all over Hell had already hit upon the same idea, before you.

As always, he drew out his points to cruel, tantalizing lengths. I was asked a thousand leading questions, and gave a million wrong answers. Hell's principle and outstanding quality, my overseer asked, was what? Its utter absence of earthly pleasures? Correct. This absence was the reason it has come to be in the first place. But now...

"But," Miplip thundered at me, "does memory have its limits?"

"I -- "

"Does it?"

"Memory -- "

"Imbecile. Respond!"

"Yes it does. Yes. I can't remember when we first met."

"Correct. Neither can I, neither can I, though my memory's a damn sight better than yours." He flashed his tongue, showed the yellow inside of his mouth. "So then, Lover, pay attention puh-leeze: if pleasure is nowhere to be found, one can become accustomed to pain? Respond!"

If pleasure was nowhere to be found, one could become accustomed to pain. All Hell had become routine, to our charges. The abyss was their home. They had forgotten the world.

I found it unbelievable that we had gone so long without realizing this simple fact. My overseer's lecture had hurt, but I felt more astonishment -- bewilderment -- than anger or pain. F«r some unremembered time I stood on my boulder thunderstruck. At length I discovered myself, gazing down at my fork. I was holding the tool, my tool, in both my hands, and I had been looking at it so hard it felt as if the weight of my eyes had increased. The fork had been given to me at the dawn of creation, shaped in one piece out of an inexistent alloy: a weapon, an *instrument of torture.*

I began gasping, speaking: "Miplip... how could we not have considered... Miplip, our job, our job... myself, I, this is all I've ever..."

Who else was there to appeal to? I looked up at my overseer.

He had remained where he was, sitting on air, but he had unwound his tail. Now it flexed lazily beneath him. He looked at me in silence a while, and then suddenly made a short speech.

"Don't blame yourself," he said. "The whole structure is filled with silly types. Oh, yes it is, Lover. The entire place. We have silliness above us and silliness locked in the ice below."

That was an odd speech, for him. The contemptuous debater's edge was gone from the words. Odd, too, was the philosophy espoused. But oddest of all... well, we hear devils all the time; we can talk to all the devils we want... well, lately I had been trying to recall the exact sound of a human voice. What was it like, once, so long ago? And in all my remembering, and

as much as I had tried, sneaking off by myself, to capture that special timbre, I never came so close as Miplip did during his odd speech. This may be significant, in the light of later events.

My overseer was quick about returning to his old self: "So, Lover, what do we have to say now? Listen to me, Baggage! I would say we have time enough, wouldn't you? Tick-lock, tick-tock, savvy? Time enough to change our rather *high*-pitched tune, hah? Respond!"

"Yes, Miplip."

"Yes, indeed; time to make them scream again. What our good people need, Lover," he broadened his nostrils in anticipation, "is a reminder of what they've left behind!"

So began the next great cycle of torture.

Miplip put his protean abilities to fuller use than ever before. He was a thoughtful father with money in his hand; he was a dear, small pony; he was a kind white-haired matron wearing a gray sweater with maroon trim; he was a voluptuous girl dancing; he was a gleaming new building lit up for the holidays; he was a bush in bloom.

Myself, I am incapable of wizardry like that, but I did make use of a small talent for projecting visible images. It requires enormous concentration and a continual up-and-down pumping motion with my head and shoulders, very tiring. Prior to this time I had used the gift rarely, and then only as a vent for my more frightened or sadder moods, because I thought the monsters and bilious landscapes thus created would strike terror into my charges. I had done it, for example, when I was lonely. But now, with Miplip's guidance {for I repeat, I had never visited the world above), I painted the interiors of Hell with grain fields, with rows of fruit shined and on display, with city streets at evening swarming with living souls, with human youngsters in clusters playing games, with sailboats on blue waters, and a great deal else. I was ceaselessly reminded that my renderings were somewhat stylized, but Miplip frolicked about in them nonetheless, '

'bringing them to life," as he put it. As if such sheer variety -- I was astounded; what a *world* there had been! -- needed anything more.

At first, in order to be sure of the efficiency of our new tack, we' had to descend among the damned and inspect our audience after each show. They were not writhing, or clawing at then- eyes and hair, or biting themselves in a mad frenzy, as they had done earlier, and so we had to investigate. It was upsetting to walk among them -- so near, so repugnant, and so fascinating at once. Could we possibly understand them? How did we ever hope to know what caused them pain? Would they *never speak?* But then Miplip and I discovered they were weeping. Open, unchecked: it had been millennia at least since we had seen such weeping. We looked closely, making sure, because as devils we lacked the physiological tools necessary for crying. When we saw their puffed, blinking, quivering eyelids, and their wet cheeks and lips and chins, we rejoiced. Their silence was not free from pain.

We took to punishing our audience immediately after each show, as a vivid reminder -- made more vivid by what they had just seen -- of where they were and where they would stay (on the negative side, this did seem to stop their weeping: they did not weep as we beat them). Then we added music to our charades. The single earthly tune Miplip could recall was a mere jingle, something he said he once heard a boy singing to a girl, but he sang it nonetheless. Assuming the form of a sweet-looking girl, on a swing perhaps, or sometimes even in the form of both children, wrapped in each other's arms, Miplip would then screech out, malevolently, in his harsh and lowdown devil's voice:

Kookaberry sitting in the old gum tree:
Merry, merry king of the bush is he.
Laugh Kookaberry, laugh Kookaberry,
Gay your life must be.

With all these new cooperative ventures, the relationship between Miplip and myself changed. I say it changed, but I cannot define that change with

any real precision. We never became friendly, exactly. My overseer never once accepted any of my proposals for our shows, not without first altering it enough to call the proposal his own, and I continued to slip away by myself and try to speak in a human voice, so that I might hear once again that forgotten sound, echoing among the stony retreats of my world. Yet the relationship *did* change. I do believe that the ferocity of his insults declined, and die number of them as well, but that is only a feeling. And so the one concrete proof of*our changed relationship that I can offer -- if indeed it is concrete proof, if indeed it was a changed relationship -- is the fact that Miplip and I became lovers.

By accident, during an unusually lengthy show, I discovered that if my designs were done with proper force they would remain as they were for a good long while, without my attention. I began joining Miplip onstage, after that. At first, having nothing better to do, we depicted the story of that man who had passed through unscathed. Miplip played him and his guide (they were reporters of some kind, investigators, we had learned by then), linked at the hands, while I did my best to represent the many fearsome torments of Hell. Our goal was to stir up jealousy and despair in our audience, but it just seemed unrealistic to expect *only* jealousy and despair -- that is, jealousy and despair unmixed with a sense of human triumph -- and so that show was dropped. Our next idea was to parody the human sexual act.

Most of our charges had been rendered impotent, in their post-Judgment bodies, and the others had been condemned to insatiable lust. Therefore sex was the perfect subject for a show, dividing our audiences into mutually antagonistic extremes. We would pit some picture of innocence, such as Miplip's girl on a swing, against my febrile approach, and the effect on our guilt-ridden spectators, all of whom had at one time or another allowed their own good natures to be usurped by evil, was immensely gratifying. Even those that did not leap upon their fellow in a paroxysm of need were nonetheless overwhelmed: they wept, waving their arms, clapping their hands, flopping about, and they silently shouted and shouted. During one such performance...

Oh, yes, I remember. I may not remember the moment Miplip and I were first brought together -- thrown together, forced together -- but this I

remember. My overseer had assumed the form of a loving and discreet young mother, sitting in a rocker, smiling gently, knitting some garment for a child while at home alone one evening (that I had painted, darkly shining, outside windows I had painted), and then I finished my painting and climbed in through one of my illusory windows, menacingly drew near, and took hold. Him? Her? Miplip? What did it matter? A human form. And I went into my puppet act, the same act that according to Miplip tired husbands and tired wives had once enacted repeatedly in their own incomprehensible imaginations, and not just tired husbands and tired wives but lovers, too, lovers, imagining other races and mechanical devices and other species when they had no devils handy, because somehow that husband or wife or moment's lover was *not enough* (in all that magnificent world's variety -- not enough! Perhaps the idea was only one of Miplip's tales, something to keep me cynical and in control of myself), but even while meditating this way I experienced the impossible tremor that uprooted my stagnant spirit, shook it so it would not be held still, and informed me that there would be no puppetry because this was no act, it was not a suggestion but an order, and Miplip heard the order, too, because in wholehearted response he at once caused his wifely clothing and rocking chair and uncompleted knitting to disappear, and lay naked beneath me on the air. I closed my eyes; they were all too familiar with his deceit. In my arms he became human.

Unfortunately, genuine sexual congress between myself and Miplip had a ruinous side effect. I did not notice this side effect that first time, because I kept my eyes closed, and my overseer remained blind to what was happening a much longer time, a lack of perception, which would have disastrous ramifications. This side effect occurred, always, at the moment of climax. Devils do experience climax -- the letting go, the timelessness. At his climax, Miplip would lose control of his morphology and revert momentarily to his natural state. On top of that, he would return to himself as he was at that moment: in transports.

From his natural ugliness he then always returned, as the orgasm wore Off, to his previous shape. Whatever small changes were thus produced he either ignored or failed to notice. It was a humiliating, not to say sickening, process. And as for myself, well, I lacked the heart to tell him. Implausible

as it sounds, centuries passed before Miplip learned what our lovemaking did to him.

Look at that: "It was a humiliating process." For *him,* of course. "And as for myself, I lacked the heart." The word for it is *revenge,* one might think. But I cannot agree that revenge was my sole motive in continuing our onstage trysts, even as much as I hated Miplip, even as long as it had been since I held the upper hand. I was shocked, more than anything else. In the rising steam of new emotions brought on by our lovemaking I lost sight of any one particular feeling; only much later on did I recognize sour little Revenge among them. By then I had long since gotten even, long since, so debasing were Miplip's transformations.

Indeed, in all the uncountable times my overseer and I had, intercourse, his sudden metamorphosis never caused me to feel any emotion but sadness. How could it have done otherwise? I made sure always to finish quickly, while I was still connected with a human being, because when Miplip reverted to his natural shape my blood shrank with acute, total disappointment. To fall from inexplicable rapture to this repulsive eyesore of a rutting partner from whom I was never free... who can find revenge in that? Oh, there was some satisfaction earlier on, before I finished. I do not deny feeling happy then, in those brief moments. But then, to wait... to know what was about to happen... every single time I wondered if I could possibly survive (though how I got the idea that there is anything besides survival, I cannot imagine), and yet every single time I survived, and Miplip survived, and together we would return to ourselves, transient Lords of partial Torture over some of our unforgiving subjects.

If I was cruel about keeping what I knew from Miplip, it was not so much because of him and me as because of our audience. What happened to Miplip during ecstasy was, from the point of view of our spectators, hilarious.

It soon became obvious that our public intercourse was having an opposite effect from the one intended. When, at the close of each performance, Miplip and I broke apart and attacked our charges, pronging and clawing and whipping, they seemed to welcome us. They laughed -- or grinned and shook, at least. They toyed with us, feinting and parrying my thrusts, trying

to grab hold of my overseer's whip. They picked up flakes of stone or handfuls of excrement and heaved them at us. Worst of all, they clasped each other and rolled around in vicious imitation of our intimacy. Miplip recognized what they were doing, but unlike me he did not understand.

Yet my overseer did not, as I was certain he would, put an end to our shows. His reaction, in fact, was unlike anything I had seen in Miplip before.

Concerning other matters besides our assignations, he became meaner and more superior than ever before. He strutted and floated around our domain in every kind of insulting disguise, railing at me, bragging of trips to earth and to Dis, drumming in his greater knowledge, greater status, greater gifts. At no time did he let slip an opportunity to tear at the skin of my feelings and expose -- *there!* -- one of my nerves. Perhaps my memory is not entirely accurate, for his infinite unkindnesses do tend to become confused, but I know that it was during this period that once in a while I looked upon our lovemaking as a form of revenge: *well, it serves him right.* More often, however, I got my revenge simply by keeping silent. Whenever I could summon up the strength, I fielded his insults without a word. I would not give him the satisfaction; I made no response. And Miplip, Miplip. This forbearance, when I could hold it, drove you to your wildest excesses. It was degrading. Even I was surprised, my overseer lost control of himself so utterly: falling into apoplectic riots of crack-voiced provocation, involuntarily changing shape, becoming several different creatures at once with several different parts of his body, and descending even to physical abuse. Miplip, what did you need, to put yourself through such abasement?

Yet concerning our performances his behavior was just the opposite. Miplip became uncertain, tentative. He made four or five suggestions, more or less along the lines of dropping the show, or nine or ten suggestions, or nineteen or twenty-nine or maybe ninety, but all of them were no more than the merest suggestion. "Only mentioning it," he was, in a voice devoid of belligerence, sounding halfhearted, half himself, half afraid. He sounded a bit like those demons with whom we had discussed the human passerby. I find I cannot fully reconstruct any of these conversations in which Miplip spoke of putting an end to the performances, and this lapse of memory is

the natural result of the way in which he always handled the subject. Miplip talked of it as if he wanted me not to notice.

So our trysts continued, if somewhat less regularly than before.

Perhaps my overseer's problem was essentially one of conscience. He wanted to do a good job, but he could no longer be sure what was torture and what was not. Certainly, our duty had never been so open to interpretation, so questionable, or so strangely involving. It was infuriating to admit not knowing where you stood. Myself... but I have already explained my feelings.

During one show -- during one climax -- which Miplip had begun as a ferocious woman with soft fur covering her hands, one of the damned threw a stone at him. At her? At Miplip? What does it matter -- the form was no longer human. The stone struck on the wing, hardly hurting Miplip, but shattering his mood once and for all. He knew that the woman with furry hands was not supposed to have his wings. He jerked upright in the air, in his natural ugliness, alert enough to realize what had happened and smart enough, of course he was smart enough, to understand in a moment that this could not have been the first time.

I cannot describe, because I lack the ability, the look with which Miplip regarded first the audience, convulsed with laughter, and then myself, still straddling him. There was an awareness of betrayal in the look, I can say that much. And a great deal of pain, as well, a pain too large for me to comprehend, because I have never seen anything that large, consigned as I am to a single blankened Division here, above the City of Dis and below Limbo.

This impossible look was quickly gone. Almost immediately his eyes resumed their customary irony. He may even have winked. What had he thought? Nothing. What had he felt? Nothing, nothing. Then he dropped away from me and began to give his usual vigorous lesson to those who had laughed.

For a few long moments I watched him, making sure.

Not that I was frightened of what Miplip might do to get back at me. What more could he possibly do to me? But I wanted to make sure... he was all right. That look he had given me -- well, never mind the look, a look can be misjudged, but I knew Miplip better, and I had more tangible cause for worry than a mere look. I mean that my overseer now knew that I had successfully hid something from him and kept it hidden, and so, if one was inclined to put these things on a competitive basis, the day was mine. Miplip now knew that for once I had won.

Can I be blamed, at all? How had I done wrong?

He lay into our charges with a will. After a while he called up to me, perhaps not with all his usual vituperative gusto, but with most of it. How loudly could he shout, anyway, out of breath as he was? So I dropped down beside him; everywhere devils work in twos. What happened just now was only an incident, as much his fault as mine, and Miplip was not one to be bothered by incidents.

While I was distracted -- while my back was turned -- he disappeared. I found his whip, but he was gone.

With thoroughgoing care, I searched the corridors and enclaves of my Division. I examined the eyes and body of every demon that came through, and those of the Centaurs and hounds as well. I went so far as to embrace them, and whisper in their ears suggestive phrases Miplip would understand. This only served to increase my isolation. I bent my fork on freestanding rocks, hugged riven trees, kissed small dank pools, and caressed shafts of fire. Stumbling and uncaring, I made a blind descent to the monstrous City of Dis and, far exceeding my authority, interrogated the fallen angels guarding its gates. They punished my insubordination. Seeing the bored expressions on the harpies who administered the punishment, and noticing its ritual nature, I understood I was not the first to be disappointed and reprimanded.

I thought: did the others who were punished continue to search? The punishment was hardly slight. Yet the devils who sometimes traveled through my Division were always alone, and though I had never before thought of them as seeking after something, that could well be their

situation. Once a demon is chastised -- perhaps not the first time, but after a few more times -- the aches and festerings must eventually become less painful than the thought of abandoning the quest. Yet the idea of so many devils on so many private crusades raised the most horrifying prospect of all in my mind's eye, that of a vast place devoid of pleasure, in which there are no overseers and subordinates, no giants and mites, no punishers and punished, but only an infinite calendar of torture and impenetrable silence, in which the ones who can fly are no more free than those who can only walk, and the pain inflicted on whoever happened to pass below was thriftily recycled for a second use higher up, and a two-hundred-million-and-second use, always the same pain, never growing smaller but only narrower and more extensive, until Hell had been dirtied from end to oblivion by that same original drop of blood, or tear, or both, which had been squeezed out at the first instant of the creation of pain. In an effort to break this nightmare cycle, I tried giving up my search for Miplip. Why torture myself pursuing him who had tortured me?

I again took up my attempt to recapture the sound of a human voice. Having so much room to myself, so much time to myself, I was able to vary volume and experiment with echo effects as I pleased. Visiting devils heard me, and no doubt guessed what I was up to, but I felt incontrovertibly separated from them already. I did not care what they heard or surmised. I only wished, from time to time, seeing one pause while flying overhead, seeing him look down at me inquisitively, I only wished that he would lend me a hand. But no one ever mingled his voice with mine. I went on alone. My duties I gave less attention, but after all, considering the doubts I had been suffering, a certain inattention to my duties was the least that could have been expected.

Perhaps it was this laxness, and then, or perhaps it was simply the strangeness of a devil trying to imitate human speech, but eventually I began to draw large and quietly attentive audiences from whatever group of damned souls happened to be in the area. Try as 1 might to chase them off, they always returned to listen some more. My fork caused only the briefest withdrawal, and my renderings of their earth's beauties were now without Miplip's help, no more than vague glosses out of a confused jumble of memories.

Sometimes, when approximating a human voice seemed like too great a task, I instead tried to re-create the special sound that my runaway overseer's voice had once had, that time he made his odd speech about silliness.

And then... though I fought against it with every weapon I had... once more I felt my insensible spirit rising, though I shrieked out loud against it, tried to lose myself in orgies of torture, ripped apart those unfortunate charges of mine that got in my way, even dragged myself down to Dis and had myself punished again. It was all to no avail. I had got it into my mind, never to be driven out, that *I could find Miplip.* I reiterated as many of his injuries as I could recall, marking them off on the impartial face of a boulder, but though the stone was so covered with markings it crumbled to bits, it made no difference. I knew he had to be here, he had to be among my charges, and I would find him.

With Heaven and Hell the way they were, he could not be anywhere else. My overseer is more clever than I, but not so clever as the devils around Dis, and they have less wits than the ones farther below.

Therefore he had become one of the damned. The ploy was characteristically wise: they are more of them than anything else in Hell. How could I know, while working my way through a crush of preterites, if one of the bodies ahead of me quietly metamorphoses into a rivulet of vomit running between my feet, and then into another body behind me? Moreover, Miplip's taking a place among our charges was characteristically proud, as well, for in human form my old overseer would find himself vulnerable to the fearsome geography -- he would suffer the heat, the stink, the pestilential lichens -- and therefore remaining untraceable would require a tremendous effort of will. One cry of pain at the wrong time and I would have him. I knew that the enormous discipline involved in keeping silent would appeal to my own, my old, lofty Miplip.

So I began to inspect my charges, one by one. Never had I been so close to them. I touched their faces, gazed deep into their reflecting eyes, stroked them frankly, boldly spoke to them. They will be here forever, but they have not been here forever: that thought sustained me. I resolved that, on the untold day when I exhausted their number, I would start again.

In the course of my searching, I discovered the man who had once, so long ago, passed through this inferno unharmed.

He was among the Wrathful. Who can understand? Perhaps he had neglected to control his powers, and his poetry -- for even in my present solitude I had heard the news that he was a poet -- had not done the job it was given; instead of describing a pilgrim's journey, in the middle of life's road, down through the circles of torment in this world, back again through Purgatory, attaining at last to beatific Grace, his poetry perhaps had merely trumpeted himself and his petty angers. Having set out to demonstrate eternal values, he instead revealed himself. Or perhaps the Powers had planned it this way from the first, that would be like Them. No man may just visit; he must return to stay. Or maybe the poet with the formidable nose was actually Miplip, Miplip, still a demon, still torturing others with visions of alternatives, of mere existing something else, something *more.* Miplip -- more? More than we have? More than we *see?* But Miplip was gone, after all. It was unreasonable, very strange, that I should worry so much about him when he was gone.

Whoever he was, this man conversed with me.

We exchanged ideas by means of pantomime. Apparently he was very excited about being given the chance to try. He had jostled his way to the front of the line I was examining, and as his hands and arms flew about he grinned, whenever his mouth was not being called upon to aid expression. Each statement was made with a huge energy, a silent, ambidextrous outburst of human feeling that strove always for the most accurate effects, the thing closest to true speech. He succeeded in getting across a great deal, more than I would have thought possible. He said they had gotten accustomed to pain, just as Miplip had suspected. The reminders of earth were very depressing, he said, as we had hoped they would be, but after a while this sorrow, too, had faded, and the damned had come to look forward to our shows, as refreshing variations in the routine.

He then said that their fondest wish at present was to begin, somehow, communicating with us, because they had developed a great fondness, a great sympathy, for their keepers. A devil's existence is predicated on torture, he said. Since it is impossible to torture anyone forever, we were

now condemned to what was originally intended for them: a life without hope.

After that his thoughts moved beyond the range of mime. But I lingered there before him, enjoying his mute philosophy. Others in the area watched us, or else began again their aimless, milling search for something besides the routine. I had no more regard for them than I had for how time was passing, as I watched this man struggling to make his points. Nor did I care how that damned deluder Miplip might be using the time -- always his greatest ally -- to slip further away. The poet seemed to be saying that the problem of hope (hands clasped over heart, raised to forehead, and then opened upwards and raised to roof) and the problem of speech (mouth opening and closing while left hand, palm up, moves from lower lip out toward listener and back) were one and the same, and that neither hope nor speech had very much to do, in the final analysis, with pain (face in a grimace, left hand in a fist and jabbing chest repeatedly, in the vicinity of the heart).

This last sight seemed to penetrate me, actually enter and pass through, like that man or any other who had passed through Hell and been reborn, mere looking could no longer fill leaving in the wake of its emotion a vacuum that. I had to touch. Moved, startled beyond even the constant abjurations my conscience had made against physical contact since the disappearance of Miplip, I reached out and took hold of his fist as it once more struck his chest. With his free hand he covered mine. All at once there was speech, real speech, in a voice that had been consumed twice over, once by agony and once by the implacable need of forgiveness:

"Don't let go, please, please, don't let go," Miplip said. "Oh lover, please."

Azrael's Atonement

Archie N. Roy

H. P. Lovecraft influences many of the American horror magazines by the pulp era and, while magazines in Britain tend more to the shadow of M. R. James. Rarely is there an independent soul like Archie N. Roy of Scotland, who follows neither trend. He's only recently begun to publish short stories like "The Kiss," "The Visitor," and "Azrael's Atonement" in Fantasy Macabre, *while surreal vignettes were penned for* Fantasy & Terror. *His influences are such as Emma Tennant, Angela Carter, and Jorge Luis Borges, tempered by his own unique and twisted vision.*

When Azrael fell through my attic window, scattering shards of glass, throwing the contents into even greater disarray, he lay curled on the floor shivering and shaking as if he had frightened himself half into insanity. Hearing the crash from below, I climbed the attic stairs to find him on the floor; at first I thought he was injured. He could have mangled a wing or torn his dark brown flesh in the fall, and as it was, he lay covered in sharp glass fragments. I took a thin and insufficient broom (Mrs. McOwan must have thrown it into the attic after considerable use) and swept the debris off him. And then I took a closer look. He had wrapped his wings tightly about himself perhaps on impact with the skylight and these (being thick and rubbery) had cushioned the blow. I saw no wounds, but he reacted in a dazed and lethargic manner when I prodded him with the broom handle.

"You can't stay here," I said, beginning to sneeze. "It's far too dusty. I'm hardly ever up here myself." The angel of death shifted slowly but he did not give the impression of responding. His glazed eyes, profoundly deep, saw only inwards. He reformed into a crouched position with his wings partly outstretched, their tips tapping the cold, coarse planks in a tentative, delicate way, and he remained like this for the next few minutes, his triangular face revealing nothing. "You'll have to come down from this attic," I remonstrated, pleaded, cajoled. But at last I was forced to lift him

bodily to his feet and drag him down the stairs. I surprised myself in being able to do this, but, in fact, his body was almost as slim as mine and only his wings were a burden -- dropping over my face to blind me from time to time. I hauled him downstairs; a grim task since my teeth were set on edge by his claws scraping stridently over the wood.

Shortly afterward I assigned the angel to the spare bedroom and locked the door in case he emerged from his trance: it had to be either this room or the garden shed and the latter was in greater need of a clean-out than the attic. Neither did I wish to be cruel and put him out. Yet despite this, I was in two minds about it. I did not want him living ill the house since he had upset the rhythm of things already; the glazier would have to be called, the attic properly tended to. The creature smelled somewhat into the bargain, of fish I thought at the time, and I did not want the smell to pervade the house, slinking into the cupboards or clinging to the wallpaper. But I felt I should wait to see what my family (who were out visiting) or even Mrs. McOwan thought of the situation, so I settled down and lit a pipe, content to tell whoever arrived first about the problem.

As chance would have it, my wife phoned to say they would be back late and Mrs. McOwan arrived earlier than usual to be shown to the bedroom and its new (temporary) occupant. Almost at once and by a process unknown to me, he had gained her affection and she looked mournfully into his blank, sinister face saying, "The poor thing's in shock." And she patted a claw sympathetically and said, her normal chores forgotten, "I'll make it something to eat." This she did, returning within the half hour with a dish of loin chops and spaghetti. She fed the death-angel (who sat upright on the bed absent-mindedly scratching his thick, oily feathers) with considerable patience but sensed my consternation and snapped, "Can you think of any food more fitting for an angel?" I admitted I couldn't, being quite ignorant of the subject. Once the meal was finished, the housekeeper motioned me urgently out of the room insisting that all he needed now was plenty of rest, sir. With no company or disturbance.

For the next few days, Azrael kept to himself, attended to by Mrs. McOwan who nursed him as if he was part of her very large brood of children. He did not receive visitors (nor apparently wished to) since I had business to attend

to and, to the best of my knowledge; neither my wife nor my daughters ever went near him. But finally Mrs. McOwan who said that the angel of death requested a word or two with me, sir, if I wasn't too busy interrupted me in my study. So I went up to see him.

"I expect your cooking's done him a power of good Mrs. M.," I said when we got to the landing in front of the angel's room, but the smell there was of rotting flesh, and for a moment I wondered. I entered the room, dismissing the hesitant woman whom I suspected was getting jealous of her charge.

I exclaimed when I saw the change in him.

Two more wings, small and still drawn tight, sprouted from his shoulders. His body had grown to twice its original size and was covered with blood-red eyes, which stared bale-fully as one, conveying an oppressive energy. His face was like nothing I had ever seen. His stench tormented me yet I listened, entranced, to all that he told me.

His story was brief and tragic; he was fortunate indeed to be alive for he, the diligent reaper, the death-angel, had fallen asleep and forgotten the decree absolute which ordained that all will pass from the earth after their three score years and ten. He it was who had first brought early mortality into the world (the first of our race had lived through several centuries) and now there were many -- so, so many -- who had been allowed to live longer. Therefore he was cast down from his throne between Heaven and Hell, almost all his strength and power removed, and was shocked so much by his fall from grace that he found he no longer possessed the strength to secure even a safe landing.

"And what will you do?" I said, distressed by his situation and, by implication, my own: I was sure the house would already smell badly for weeks.

He paced the room in an awkward way and said he had been thinking about that and wanted to be reinstated. But he knew that his task now was to show he was still capable, able to extinguish, destroy, efficiently and easily. More than anything to atone for his negligence. Too many souls had escaped and reparations had to be made. A sacrifice. There was the problem, he added,

of his greatly depleted energy; he would have liked to weed out all those who were old and spent but this would involve such a long, tiresome journey. Instead he would expel the strength he retained on the place he had fallen into, and give the city and its inhabitants up as an offering. At once I was alarmed, thinking of my family, but the angel of death, being altogether grateful, assured me they could leave and should do so at once. I would be safe in his company.

Accepting this was all I could do. I saw my family and our housekeeper off to our weekend home over on the coast, assured them I would join them later. Then, I flew on Azrael's back high across the city, his wings beating in my ears, the wind blowing my hair and freezing my cheeks. Above us it became overcast and threatened a storm. He dropped quite suddenly somewhere near the city center; soon I caught the dusty odor of light summer rain falling on the streets. Below us lay the vast exhibition complex built on reclaimed dockland and filled, as it often was during these summer months, almost to capacity. We landed, entered, saw me parties of children being guided round the displays, adults coming in from the showers to wander unsystematically and miss large sections. Few took any notice of us: there were many rare and unique objects already there.

Azrael began his self-appointed task by breathing over a case of early cylindrical bowls and goblets enameled with the arms of long-dead royalty and they melted altogether. Briefly the hall was swept with molten glass soon to be met by rivers of silver (from a collection of English rococo) and gold. Everything seen or touched dissolved into the gathering rainbow eddying over our feet. Statues in bronze and clay fused into each other and into rivulets of running iron and concrete. The people who had entered the building were as exposed to the angel as the objects they were admiring; when he appeared he deformed their bodies instantly into chaotic masses of bone and flesh unable to repel or resist the wild, straining fluids. Everything and everyone became the lake in the time it took us to pass through the center's different sections. And the lake slopped against the walls until the death-angel melted the whole structure -- roof, balconies, walls, pillars -- into it so that it flowed freely over, beneath, and on every side of us, the

only thing I could see. Azrael paused and for a moment he pondered. I sensed he was working on what the most feasible action was. Then a decision was made, the eyes in his arms, stomach, and hips glared; he gestured to me to hold his waist and he held out his gnarled, leathery hands, palms down. Once more the effect was peculiar and complete. From the lake's outer edge, kaleidoscopic torrents rushed toward us. I felt a desperate pressure, standing as we were in the tempestuous core, as different materials twined, molded, comressed themselves into a single, monolithic creation. And the wind and the roar of this coming together thundered in my ears. Then I realized, when the noise stopped, that we stood inside the black, cold belly of something very solid.

We flew into light and space from this new, physical presence. It dwarfed the city's towers of brick and steel. I inspected the surface, ran my fingers over it. Most of it was smooth and polished like the glass from which it partly came, but scanning its height I could see, now and then, part of an iron spar, a skull, a twinkle of marble or onyx, a tatter of rope, a shattered human hand flattened indivisibly against the surface: for the exhibition palace and all its contents had been decomposed and recombined.

However, the angel of death had no interest at all in this since he had known in advance what the outcome would be. My own interest lay in gaining a better perspective, a view of the whole. So we flew until I could turn and distinguish the shape of a monument or gravestone, totally smooth for the most part, and inscribed with the city's name. And beneath the inscription were two dates: to the left was the year of its birth, to the right the present year. I said to Azrael, "If that is a gravestone, where is the grave?"

Some of his eyes had closed (he appeared quite tired by his effort), but those still open watched the boulevards, shops, offices, and the skyline behind. For a brief spell I saw the great divide shining in his face and knew that the monument told of a sacrifice" soon to be witnessed by one man. As we flew farther into the city I regretted the bright clothes I wore, my lack of something funereal.

The angel of death set his feet on the main highways, and these and the streets adjoining them soon lost their purpose. Vehicles on them rusted badly in seconds and slowed to a halt. The streets led nowhere. Many attempted to leave the city, first by transport then by walking, but always the roads returned them to the point of their departure. At last the people abandoned these attempts and sat alone or in groups, resigned to watch silently the city's collapse.

But few homes and offices adjusted to the directionless, meaningless streets or the presence of the ruinous angel on them. Most of them fled, leaving familiar sites and views. They would up with a heave and a sigh of masonry and drag their foundations sometimes for miles to relocate themselves in lightly wooded city parks, the acres of waste-ground left by the demolition squads, and car dumps. Sometimes people were victims of a house's panic. On one occasion, a detached villa began to desert its avenue only to topple dangerously when a foundation wall parted from the rest. The sudden tilt must have sent the family crashing to the floor and an accident downstairs quickly produced a fire, which spread through the rooms. A child leaned out of his bedroom and only half-awake, said in a surprised voice, "Ah, ah, help me. Help me, Mummy." The home, panicking now over its loss of momentum and the flames eating into it, carried out its initial plan in a spasm of energy, shooting through a garden fence and across a school playground. The fiery ball sped into the distance like a comet and left a trail of gray, cloudy smoke in its wake.

Many streets emptied. The departure was usually slow, the homes taking care to negotiate routes in built-up areas. Streets were left to themselves, beginning and ending nowhere. Only the sites and the houses' tracks and a loosened refuse of bricks and mortar remained. The houses came to rest anywhere they considered safe and so they scattered in a haphazard array. A river bisected the city and numerous dwellings crowded into the tunnel beneath it, bunching up to recover a sense of security. Several small bungalows crawled into a multi-story car park.

Azrael coughed (I think unintentionally) and the city's inhabitants were afflicted with a vast array of plagues and fevers. Nobody noticed this except me. The very young and the very old, lacking the adults' strength, had fallen

asleep by early afternoon and had entered a deep and invincible coma; the others ambled in silence or sat numb to the world. They could not see the monument or the ulcers, sores and poisons which infected them. But the grim, miasmic plagues spread rapidly. For my part, all I could do was disregard these afflictions and the hordes of insects and animal scavengers who, excited by and immune to the general decay, attacked the people with quite amazing ferocity.

By this time the city was confused about what it should be. Many deceased buildings reappeared to fill the gaps left by the deranged retreat of the existing ones as if the city was trying to rebuild itself from memories of its past. But the attempt was forlorn and mismanaged because often these relics were summoned only to crumble away since the lay of the land had shifted and their weight was unsupported. For a time, however, I witnessed the past parading through the paralyzed streets, over the gathering mountains of rubble. And out of their graves the city's dead citizens came in a dismal storm of corpses to toast its demise. All were dressed for the occasion. Earth-encrusted skulls cackled happily or moaned in despair and dejection (for some owned an eternal love for their city) above outdated army tunics or merchant luxury, finely embroidered dresses or priestly robes. They consumed what food and drink there was left in the chaos quickly for they were ravenous after their long abstinence. And the living were content enough to squat together in sickly groups and watch the corpses indulge.

From the start, the death-angel distanced himself from the revel. Then, struck by sudden impatience, he gestured at the cavorting masses, driving them back below the soil like soundly beaten dogs. His mood altered again, his face showed a fresh determination. The eyes lost their blood-redness and instead took on a pale, cold, and tenuous gray; leaking long wisps of mist which were blown through the city. When the buildings were enveloped, the mist seeping into the walls and dripping into their insides, their souls departed, their strength vanished so that flat, empty derelicts of silence remained. The citizens breathed the mist into their lungs and sighed as their flesh turned to gossamer. Their shadows took their leave of them and their bodies floated and twisted this way and that to fall finally into the sea or

onto the hills to the north. All that remained was ethereal silence sniffing round the empty, flat-as-cardboard ruins. A grave around its stone.

I shielded my eyes when the sun breached the clearing mist to reflect the monument. "My family will be awaiting me," I said to the angel and he in turn made his farewell, growing rapidly in size since his sacrifice (and the ability he showed) had, he informed me, just been accepted. Immensely relieved, he grew till he was larger than the heavens, and east and west were placed between his hands, and taking back his throne, he left this world and entered the next.

The Eldritch Horror of Oz

L. Frank Craftlove

L. Frank Craftlove's remarkable chronicle of absurd horror appeared in Oziana *in 1981, a journal for Ozfans typical of the myriad acutely specialized newsletters devoted to Arthur Machen, Tolkien, Sherlock Holmes, August Derleth, and diverse fan-clan interests. The actual author is Phyllis Ann Karr, best known for popular fantasy novels like* Frostflower and Thorn. *Occasionally, a story of hers will appear in magazines as varied as* Wyrd *(now defunct) and* Fighting Woman News. *She co-edited the first series* Fantasy & Terror *and is presently one of the staff of translators for* Fantasy Macabre.

I have been twenty-seven for thirty-two years now. It is a strange, bitter age, twenty-seven, filled with dark forebodings and weird, yearning doubts as to the nature of the universe. Would I could say that mine were still doubts! I believe that next year I will turn twenty-eight, and after that, perhaps twenty-nine, even thirty. It may be that from the vantage point of mature years I will find myself better able to bear the knowledge -- no, rather I should say the semi-groundless inner conviction -- which I must continue to guard secret from my fellow countrymen and women, lest the sheer cosmic terror of it drive them mad.

In the ancient days, it is said, this Land of Oz was like those strange places in the great outside world, where folk age and die year by year, leading existences as brief as the flicker of a bird over the badminton net. Although what "death" may be, I am not entirely sure; the Wizard, having seen much of the phenomenon during his earlier life in the Country of the Omahas, has explained to me that, though resembling destruction, it is not identical with this last, for even were one of us to be ground to the merest atoms, all of the particles would still be alive, while death in the outer world comes upon persons completely whole, as if something unseen, invisible, and nebulous were exhaled into space, never to return, and leaving the person with

neither motion, speech, nor, apparently, sensations. For this reason I have my doubts concerning mankind in the outside world, fearing them to be a race inhabited by nameless entities from the vast reaches of space; and at times there seems to me something sinister about the little Wizard himself, while even a glimpse of our fair Princess Dorothy Gale of Kansas, with her childish companions, has now and again sent a chill through me, for though they make their homes now in the Emerald City, they were once natives of the outside world, and who is to say that the lurking infection of their race may not yet lie dormant in these fair, laughing girls?

I have no personal recollection of those pre-Oztoric times, for I was a babe of six months when the Fairy Queen, Lurline, enchanted Oz and turned it into a fairyland -- for what purposes, unfortunately, I have come to suspect with horrifying lucidity. I remained a babe of six months for approximately fifty to seventy-five years (my parents lost exact count of the time) before it dawned upon my nascent consciousness that one might experiment with the joys of advancing childhood. I believe I passed about a century in very pleasant fashion, climbing from the cradle to the age of eight. Had I been wise, I would have stopped there! But a period of political ferment was just then hatching into a bright new era for Oz -- insofar as anything in the universe can be termed bright or hopeful. The evil witches of the East and West were melted away; the Wizard returned for a time to Omaha and left the Scarecrow to govern Oz from the Emerald City; General Jinjur with her Army of Revolt toppled the straw man and established her own brief regime; Glinda the Sorceress came from her red southern country of the Quadlings to oust Jinjur and set the young Princess Ozma on the throne, where she is still reigning. The Wizard was shortly to return, seeming content enough thenceforward to take a subordinate position as our Queen's advisor; but at the time my youthful imagination was more fired with the Wogglebug.

This remarkable insect, a rarity even among Ozites, had mysteriously appeared at Ozma's side during the young Princess's trials previous to claiming her crown. He had at one time been of the usual insectival dimensions, but had taken up residence in the schoolroom of one Professor Nowitall, where first he gained his impressive store of knowledge, and at last, as he recounted it, was wonderfully projected into his present man-

sized stature. At the time that H. M. Wogglebug, T. E., had joined Ozma's party, the future ruler had herself been unaware of her own identity, so that the insect's astuteness in choosing sides becomes all the more remarkable. Be mat as it may, the new Queen rewarded the Highly Magnified and Thoroughly Educated Wogglebug with the Presidency and Head Professorship of the newly-founded Mistictonic University, where it was Ozma's design, and the Wogglebug's, to train and develop the budding minds and bodies of Oz youth, as Oz youth felt moved to attain college age.

I was one of those who felt so moved, and within twenty months had climbed from eight years old to eighteen, when I took leave' of my parents, whose own age I had now nearly equaled, and journeyed from my native purple Gillikin plains to the hazy blue-green hills of the Mistictonic Valley, tucked into the border between the Emerald City and the azure territory of the Munchkins.

My first forty-seven years at Mistictonic University I count among the most cheerful of my existence. Our days were spent entirely in the wholesome development of our bodies, by means of whatever athletic sports and games most appealed to our youthful spirits. I changed my major several times, from wrestling to tennis to track, before settling down in bowling, which I found suited me the best because of its individuality -- one man, not against a second man, but against ten (generally) inanimate pins. Mountain climbing, to which I was most drawn, was available only as a minor, the hills in that region offering no great challenge to the aspirant mountaineer. In the morning, at midday, and in the evening we students were required to swallow Educational Pills developed by the Wogglebug himself, thus imbibing more than most of us cared to know of reading, writing, arithmetic, and such other pedantic pursuits.

At the end of my forty-seventh year, by which time I had by degrees brought myself to the age of twenty-four, I had not only imbibed twice over all the Educational Pills in the august insect's curriculum, but acquired strong minors in every sport offered. The morning came when I was summoned into the office of the Head Professor, whose outward features -- the disk-like body with its brown and white stripes; the two thin, prehensile legs and the single pair of shiny, narrow arms; the smiling face with its

convoluted nose, antennaed ears, and bulging black eyes -- I had come to know and love during my undergraduate years.

The insect President sadly informed me that, although I had always been one of his best scholars, the time had come when my place was needed for another student, a new Winkie applicant. Two courses were open to me: either to accept my degree and begin my career elsewhere in Oz, or to remain at Mistictonic in the capacity of an Assistant Professor. After a moment's reflection, I chose the latter course, intending to use my first sabbatical for a journey to Mount Munch, there to pursue my scholarly avocation of mountain climbing.

The following year, after a brief training period, I turned twenty-five and began my career of dispensing the Educational Pills to be swallowed at mealtime. The duties were not overly strenuous and allowed me ample time for research into such debated topics as whether hash trees or hoaks provided the best wood for bowling pins.

Within ten years of my first coming to the university, I had from time to time experienced strange and not altogether pleasant dreams, the only shadow upon my otherwise idyllic existence. Since they came only every third or fourth year, I had paid little attention to them; nor, in view of their apparent slightness and nonsensicality (in the healthy light of day) had I ever mentioned them to my friends and colleagues. Now, however, whether due to the change in my age, or in my status and duties, the simultaneous freedom from old pressures and initiation into new responsibilities, or the knowledge that I had not digested all knowledge -- for I had come to muse that by giving us booklore painlessly in tablet form, the Wogglebug had exercised a degree of control over what we learned -- for whatever reason, my dreams began to come oftener, seemingly to last longer (as far as we can gauge the length of these nebulous phantasms of our sleeping hours) and to become progressively more terrible and horrifying.. In my nocturnal visions, I would wander amongst strange, dark edifices, in their sharp yet elusive angularity totally unlike any of the simple domelike Oz dwellings I had always known in my waking hours, and awesomely massive in their overpowering immensity. In the earlier dreams, I contented myself with exploring these incredible cities, attempting to measure their angles -- so

utterly dissimilar to anything I had ever learned from Professor Wogglebug's geometry pills -- and occasionally trying to lay out baseball diamonds and football fields for the perpetually unseen inhabitants, or to set up curiously-shaped stones in the formation of tenpins, which invariably toppled down because of the peculiar tilt of the ground long before I could bowl them over with the black cinder-like spheroids that sometimes lay about.

As the dreams increased in frequency and duration, however, I began to experience sensations such as I had never known in my waking life, and which I slowly came to recognize as fear. Fear -- true fear – has long been a thing virtually unknown among Ozites, a thing banished along with hunger, death, and chicken pox. We may fear that our team will lose the game, or that the caramel crop will fail and we will have to make do with taffy and licorice for a year; but cosmic dread, the aching terror that grips the heart with stifling coils of awe, that tautens each fiber of the body with a pain more exquisite than mere physical sensation, and splits the mind apart with the vertiginous glimpse of cosmic infinities beyond measure, until sanity itself quails before the blasphemous immensity -- this emotion is unknown among my countrymen, and it is probably as well for their peace of mind.

It was this fear that now came into my dreams, first slowly, almost timidly, and then with greater and greater forceful-ness, as I continued to wander those miasmic thoroughfares between the dark towering edifices with their obscene angles and brooding semi-consciousness of massive power. Never had I encountered any other living beings in those dreams; indeed, there seemed to be a mist of unnamable ages lying heavy over the scene, as if all sentient life must have departed innumerable eons ago. Only here and there, from certain black fissures and eldritch cracks in the paving, noxious, chill vapors and incredibly foul odors seemed sometimes to be exhaled forth.

At first I used for a while to run giddily from plane to plane, calling aloud at the top of my lungs for some other creature to join me. But in time I grew to fear the unseen tilings that never answered, and I began to creep from shadow to murky shadow; shuddering at the very fall of my own foot. Stay in one place I dared not. Now and again my need for motion would overpower even my horror of making a sound, and I would break into a run,

vaulting over the irregular ground lest the encroaching insanity should break through my skull and enter in, falling at last only when the thudding hollowness of utter exhaustion in chest and stomach revolted against the pounding terror in cranium and temples. From these visions I would wake with rattling heart and crawling flesh, my bed drenched in sweat; and not until I had changed my sheets and pajamas, swallowed some milk and cookies, and read the *Songs of Father Goose,* could I return to slumber.

Whereas in my undergraduate years the seeming ridiculousness of the dreams used to keep me still about them, now I kept them even more strictly to myself, lest my companions begin to think me mad indeed. I began, however, to keep a private diary in which I recorded faithfully as much of the terrible visions as I could recall in the daylight. I began, also, to try to reconstruct in model the dream cities, working for hours behind locked doors as I carved and fitted small dominoes of cheap black marble, but never could I re-create the crudest semblance to the un-Ozly geometry of the dizzying originals. I had greater success in drawing simple approximations of a few of the characters which I frequently glimpsed carven in the weathered stone. Some I guessed to be phonetic letters, others had the appearance of hieroglyphs, while two or three, encountered singly rather than in a series, I took for representations of some creature either adored, feared, or anathematized. The symbol I found to remain most distinctly in my waking mind was a sort of stick-figure crab, with a small, triply-horned head, and six jointed legs, three on either side of its nearly circular body.

My written notes I kept carefully hidden away on my bookshelf, where, textbooks being nothing more than quaint, antique ornaments at Mistictonic, they were left undisturbed. My black marble dominoes I took carefully apart after each unsuccessful attempt at re-creating a model of the dream cities, and none suspected they were anything but the pieces of some innocent interlocking puzzle; a few of my friends even attempted, in idle moments, to fit them into a Gump, Winged Monkey, Kalidah, or other common beast.

However, the increasing frequency of the dreams and resultant interruption of my natural rest, coupled with the hours I spent in the privacy of my room

recording my impressions and balancing my dominoes, began to tell upon my nerves and personal appearance. At length Professor Wogglebug called me into his private study. Faced with our reverend leader's concern for my well-being, I did not scruple to answer his questions with as much as I could tell of my dreams, even describing my efforts to re-create the monstrous cities in model, and offering to let him ready my diary. The respected insect listened gravely and attentively to my recital, prompting me from time to time with sympathetic urgings. Then, crossing his left leg on his right, and pressing the fingertips of his two hands together, he suggested in a serious voice that the visions which so disturbed my slumbers must be nothing more than the results of overwork upon my conscientious and imaginative nature. "In short, my good Harkam," said he in his cultivated, slightly buzzing voice, "the accumulation of evidence indicates mat a prolonged vacation would do wonders for your constitution. It occurs to me that this is as propitious a time as any for your first sabbatical. I believe you have been cherishing a plan to climb Mount Munch? Climb it as often as you wish. Take a full year -- take the summer, the autumn, the winter, and the spring -- and during your travels partake of as many herbs and spicy dishes as the various regions afford. And then, my boy, you will return to us well seasoned," the Wogglebug concluded, smiling in self-satisfaction, for he was addicted to puns.

Thanking the Thoroughly Educated President, I packed my bags and set out within the week. On his advice, I left behind my diary and marbles, as a means to put all such morbidity far from my mind. Nor did I carry so much as a notebook and pencil, for we agreed it was best that I should determine beforehand the dreams would not come and I would have nothing to write down. (Thus it is that I can no longer be sure of what, precisely, it was that I found, or thought I found, in the Great Sandy Waste on July 17th in about the fifty-first year of Ozma's reign.) Our conversation had gone no farther than the President's study, so that my friends, colleagues, and students believed no otherwise but that I was taking my sabbatical for the pure pleasure of it; and it was a lighthearted and jocular farewell party that saw me off on the morning of June 24th.

I meant, of course, to travel straight north to the Yellow Brick Road, taking this until it crossed the Munchkin River, which I would then follow as far as

Dune witch, where I could cut straight east to Mount Munch itself. However, having spent my last fifty years at Mistictonic University, with only an occasional visit to the Emerald City or to my parents on the southern edge of Gillikin Country, I missed my turn in the lonely blue hills with their age-old forests of twisted trees; nor did I realize my mistake until, after two days of hiking, I found the mountainous scenery shading from blue to purple.

At first I thought I had somehow crossed the Yellow Brick Road without noticing it, and come straight north into my own native Gillikin hills. Progressing onward, however, I soon found the purple giving way to a decidedly roseate cast, and realized that I was in fact walking due south, into the crimson country of the Quadlings. Since the sun was already setting, I spread out my sleeping bag beneath the ancient redwoods and, after dining on one of the square meal tablets developed by the Wizard of Oz, lay down to sleep, repeating to myself: "Facing north, sunset on your left hand, sunrise on your right, south behind. Facing south, sunset on your right hand, sunrise on your left, north behind."

For some nights, since my interview with Professor Wogglebug, my slumber had been free of the disturbing dreams, but whether it was the annoyance of forgetting my directions, or the crimson color of the Quadling scenery, which I had never before actually seen for myself, I seemed to pass the entire night in a nightmare from which I could not voluntarily awaken, though at times aware of the dream nature of what I was experiencing. Lacking notebook, I could not in the morning set down what then remained in my memory of my visions of the night of June 26-27, so that now I would be unable to give even a single clear sequence from that long and terrifying dream adventure; I only recall that I was once again among those vertiginous cities of towering dark non-geOzmetric edifices, and that, this time, the color of blood seemed somehow intertwined with the other impressions -- but this, of course, may have been merely the unfamiliar hues of the Quadling forest obtruding into my subconscious mind. One clear image, and one only of all those glimpsed that night, remains to me in all its ghastly distinctness: an eldritch creature, like the living original of that stick-figure tri-horned crab whose image I had seen often enough carved in the basalts, marbles, and the stones of less familiar texture. This

time I beheld the being itself, its flat and rounded torso giving off an obscene sheen in the murky light, its six legs encased in clattering, jointed carapaces.

It was some time after awakening before I could swallow my breakfast tablet, and some time longer before I was able to rise and proceed upon my way, not without a backward glance at the brooding redwood under whose curiously twisted branches I had passed the harrowing night. I did not retrace my steps to head northward. Instead, I determined to seek out Glinda, the Sorceress of the South.

The Ruler of the Quadlings, if what I had imbibed of Oztory were true, must have held her sway by far the longest of all our present rulers. It was Glinda who had kept the southern land safe while the evil witches ravaged the east and the west; Glinda who had disenchanted and restored the child Ozma to her throne; Glinda who had taught the Wizard all his basic knowledge of arcane lore. Glinda, I believed, had been settled in her Quadling palace even before our own Good Witch had taken charge of the north, and certainly Glinda had always made her influence much more felt throughout Oz than had our Gillikin ruler. It occurred to me that Glinda might free me from my dreams, if anyone could.

Despite its sanguine color, which I found more and more depressing the farther south I walked, and despite its tortuous paths and stunted, almost deformed flora, Quadling Country, thanks to Glinda's government, is generally safer and better signposted for the traveler than are the wilder kingdoms to the east and north, and especially the lurid and mysterious yellow land of the Winkies to the west. Thus, it was with comparatively little danger that, in mid-July, I reached Glinda's palace, near the edge of the Great Sandy Waste.

To my frustration, the Sorceress herself was not then available, having flown in her swan chariot to the Emerald City to be present at another royal feast. I had been beset by the strange dreams almost every night since my first in Quadling territory, and this must inevitably have told upon my nerves: in my bleak frame of mind, there seemed something monstrous and disproportionate in the fact that while I was haunted through nightmare cities, she to whom I looked for help was calmly feasting at her ease. It

occurred to me, however, that I might perhaps turn my wait to profitable use; and pretending my mission was research to collect material for a new course of the Wogglebug's history pills, I gained admittance to the private room where the *Macronomicon,* or Great Book of Records, is kept chained to a heavy table.

Certain leaves at the beginning of this ponderous tome, I soon found, were adhered together at the edges by a curious sticky substance. It was impossible to determine whether they had been purposely sealed, or whether some long-forgotten student of pre-Oztoric days had sucked a peppermint stick while perusing the volume; but in a perverse mood, I carefully parted the leaves with my jackknife, and quickly found myself engulfed in a nightmare of which my own dreams had been no more than faint presages.

For hours I read on, filling my brain despite myself with proscribed and blasphemous secrets of Elder Races and Old' Ones, who had held the world before man; of creatures that came to the earth from distant stars; of unhuman entities who waged cosmic warfare and to whom our planet itself was no more than one small battle arena in the vast galaxies; of great Cthjello sleeping through quintillions of ages in the sunken city of R'ealleh; of the mighty Yug-Succotash, and of the gibbering mad god Hazimoth who sits at the center of the universe piping insane antiphonies on his ocarina.

Oz itself, I learned from these dread pages, had been turned into a land of magic and of undying inhabitants, not through the kindly offices of a beneficent Fairy Queen intent on innocuous well-doing, but for a purpose far more evil and sinister, and which I can hardly bring myself, even here, to record. Untold millennia in the past, a Grand Race of giant crablike sextopeds had held sway over the planet, until threatened and ultimately defeated by a still more ancient and nauseating race of semi-formless obscenities which lived in underground fissures, exhaling their noxious fumes. Yet the Grand Race was not to be destroyed. The sextopeds, having learned the secrets of time travel, had sent certain advance scouts down through the centuries, to prepare a race of healthy bodies. Into these same bodies the sextopeds had fled -- or were to flee -- from their enemies when

the time had come -- or was to come -- jumping over the vast expanse of eons to displace the inhabitants of the bodies thus prepared for them.

My brain reeling beneath these hideous revelations, I staggered from the room and out of the palace, coming more or less to my senses only when I found the sands of the Great Sandy Waste about my ankles.

Farther on, these sands became deadly: their touch turns flesh at once into dust, and the very fumes rising from them are enough to poison the lungs and Wood. Small wonder that this desert forms an impassable barrier between our Land and the outside world! Yet for some distance from the habitable territory, the Great Sandy Waste is no different from any ordinary stretch of desert.

As I stood here, still dazed and unsure of my senses, I saw, some yards beyond me to the right, what appeared to be a small black stone lying in the sands. Wading to it, I found it to be the protruding corner of some much larger block, and the substance, even as I had feared from a distance, bore an unsettling resemblance to that stone building material I had seen so often in my dreams. Squatting, I began with trembling fingers to clear the sand from around the stone. Due to the difficulty of preventing the dry grains from sliding back, I was unable to bring much of the stone into view; what little I succeeded in laying bare gave evidence, if the visible lines and angles were extended, of the same unnatural geometry I had come to dread in my nightmares.

Suddenly, I uncovered part of a carving -- incredibly old, worn almost away, perhaps even before it had become buried in the sands, yet still traceable. I hesitated, dreading, yet impelled to examine the complete hieroglyph. At last, as one under compulsion, I feverishly brushed back the sand. The image was about as big as my two palms, and *bore the unmistakable outline of a six-legged thing.*

How it was that I retained enough grip, however tenuous, on my sanity that I was able to recover it afterward, I do not know. It seems certain that for a time after finding that blasphemous carving I did lose all control over my senses. If, indeed, I had not been driven into a state of temporary madness by the words of the *Macronomicon,* so that the corner of stone, which I

found in the Waste, may have been part of a hideous hallucination. It was a mercy (or was it?) that when I fled from that carven sextoped I ran back to the land and not toward the destroying part of the sands.

I was found, about sunset, on the edge of the habitable land, in a state of babbling collapse. The experience had added two years to my age in a single afternoon.

The Sorceress had returned during the time I was on the sands, and I was tended and watched through my delirium by Glinda herself -- not, I later surmised, for any extraordinary kindness on her part, but for simple precaution, lest anyone else hear too much of my ravings. As soon as I had sufficiently recovered my mental capacities and physical health, she privately expressed to me her deep regret that she had not been on hand to prevent my researches in the *Macronomicon* and on the sands. "Your dreams alone," she affirmed, "I could easily have cured with a spell, but what you have read and seen here can only be erased from your memory by the slow passage of time, if at all. True, you might drink of the Water of Oblivion, but this would erase all your other memories as well, reducing you again to the mental state of an infant, and perhaps allowing the nightmares to start again from die beginning."

Such was my horror at the knowledge I had gained, that I actually considered requesting a dose of the Water of Oblivion; and, indeed, now wonder if that would not have been the wiser course. At length, however, being reassured by the Sorceress, I decided to retain my personality and the memories of my entire past life, among which had been so many comparatively happy moments. "I need hardly caution you, Harkam," said the Sorceress, to keep all that you have read and seen here strictly to yourself. It would be useless to spread these matters among your fellow countrymen, and might disturb the peace of the realm. Be assured, Ozma, our Wizard, and myself are doing all in our power to prevent what you have read of from happening. By forbidding the practice of magic by anyone but ourselves, and by investigating and keeping watch over the ways of Ozma's stranger subjects, seeking out the hidden and forgotten corners of Oz, we hope to stamp out all lingering devotees of the Cthjello and Hazimoth cults. We have already banished or transformed several spies of the Grand Race,

and one would need to be highly intelligent indeed to escape eventual detection."

Glinda administered to me a potion that cured my dreaming, and since that time I have at least not wandered among those ghastly, enormous black cities. My optimism somewhat restored, I made my journey to Mount Munch as planned. Climbing the blue mountain proved an exhilarating experience, and when I eventually returned to Mistictonic, it was with spirits cheered and refreshed, though vague doubts and suspicions still clung about the corners of my mind, as if the impressions of those tortuous streets and brooding angles could not be so easily dispelled as the visions themselves.

These lingering doubts were not laid to rest when, on returning to my old home, I found my small black marbles missing, as well as all my notes and dream diaries. Nor was my mind set at rest by the chance sight, at an evening football game a week later, of our President's profile, at the top of the stadium, silhouetted against the sunset.

Bear in mind that I have no real grounds for the suspicion that persists in lurking at the back of my mind. Who could suggest that it was not pure concern for my sanity, as he himself explained to my questions, that prompted Professor H. M. Wogglebug, T. E., the only party who knew of them, to burn my notes and marbles in an effort to exorcise their morbid influence? That for the last thirty-two years I have been unable to leave the grounds of Mistictonic University means very little, when every single circumstance which has arisen to cancel or postpone each plan for a vacation, sabbatical, or visit to some place or person outside, has been fully natural and logical.

Nor have I the least proof that my mail, both incoming and outgoing, is carefully watched or has ever been tampered with -- to any communication I have ever sent the Sorceress, I have always received a thoroughly comforting and reassuring reply; nor have I the least evidence that the replies do not originate from Glinda herself, having never seen a clear specimen of her handwriting. And although neither Professor Nowitall nor any of his students supposed to have witnessed the event has ever been found to confirm the Wogglebug's own story of his origin, no one has ever

questioned that a minute insect, when projected or "thrown upon" a screen by means of a magnifying glass, could then climb down from the screen in its Highly-Magnified state and retain that size permanently. Moreover, as Glinda assured me, any spy of the sextopeds would need to be unusually intelligent in order to escape detection by herself, Ozma, and the Wizard.

Yet though our revered President is fastidious about his dress, there was an occasion, eighteen years ago, when, during the excitement of tearing down the goalposts, his coat ripped along the right side. And on that side, midway between the arm and the leg, I am convinced I saw an old scar where a second arm, or a second leg, must long ago have been neatly amputated.

O, Christmas Tree

Jessica Amanda Salmonson and W. H. Pugmire, Jr.

Wilum's and my only other collaboration (so far) appeared in Dennis Etchison's best-selling anthology Cutting Edge. *Entitled " 'Pale, Trembling Youth' " it was also chosen for* Year's Best Horror. *Our earlier tale together was "O, Christmas Tree" published in Gordon Limner's* Space & Time, *issue fifty, January 1979.*

> *Wilum has written many tales of Sesqua Valley. Some he says he is no longer fond of, but they've given him a lasting reputation among Cthulhu Mythos fans. His stories have appeared in* Deathrealm, Grue, Fantasy Macabre, Astral Dimensions, The Diversifier, *and others. He has published numerous magazines of his own including* Midnight Fantasies *and* Old Bones. *He is currently editor of* Tales of Lovecraftian Horror *published by Robert Price.*

December's icy fingers wound around Richard Whitson, tendrils of a cold-blooded thing probing for any opening in his cloak.

Somewhere distant, carolers weakly defied the weather with the feeble warmth of song. He crossed the nearly deserted depot parking lot, hunching in his sweater and overcoat like a turtle in its shell, and boarded the bus for Sesqua Valley. The bus hesitated a few moments, as if expecting other riders, and then lurched forward in departure.

Although the bus's heaters allowed a modicum of physical comfort, loneliness persisted, a sort of melancholy that had been increasing with the approach of Christmas. *We are all poor tortured christs reborn every day;* his mind framed the thought as profound and original, but it only made him offer a pitiable smile to his reflection in the window. *This* year, at least, he

would spend the holiday with kin. That thought alone must suffice to thaw his chilly spirit, for all attempts to converse with the driver had met with the grumblings of a confirmed misanthrope-.

After a frustrating monologue, Richard abandoned futile efforts at conversation with the driver's broad back, abandoning hope of human contact. He relied instead on the splendor of the northwest countryside to ease his aching spirit, finding comfort in dark evergreens and winter sky.

After some twenty kilometers of monotonous beauty, a hypnotic weariness overtook the lone traveler. The sky remained an even, misty gray; yet to his dulled senses it suddenly came to harbor grave foreboding. He shuddered more firmly than he had from the cold and blinked attempted slumber from his eyes, searching for some brooding presence o'er the mountains, finding nothing to explain his mood.

Before he could apprehend any source of his irrational anxiety, a deeper feeling engulfed him, one of drifting through the vacuum of an infinite cosmos. And he imagined, or dreamt, the driver with malignant eyes glaring forward into the still gray mists of their quiet, fathomless journey.

Richard jerked upright in his seat, slowly aware that he had dozed. His heart slowed to a normal pace and he reoriented himself in the safe, sane surroundings of wakeful reality.

The bus entered the valley. Above thick evergreens, silhouetted by a vast scarlet sunset, mountains rose in awesome magnificence. Particularly striking were two jagged peaks like wings folded upon some gigantic demon's shoulders.

The majesty of Sesqua Valley was dizzying. He closed his eyes, laid back his head, and would have enjoyed a more restful sleep had the bus not come to a jolting halt.

The sky had grown dark, arrayed with formless shadow. From the bus window he saw, in the distance, a huge, century-old house whose architecture predated anything commonly found in the Northwest. It was certainly a place to cherish in this sad age, when houses barely last their

young owners the time it takes to pay a mortgage. Yet it was deserted and in disrepair, lower windows boarded up and upper ones glowering blind and broken. A large crooked oak, devoid of leaves in this season, had been allowed to grow so close to that antique residence that its trunk had damaged a portion of the building. The welfare of the tree apparently mattered more than the house itself.

With his father dead, there was nothing to steal him back to city life: no family, no job worth saving. As he pulled his two suitcases from the rack above his head, he was already considering the renovation of that old mansion. He had, after all, a small inheritance that would allow him a new start almost anywhere. Here, at least, he had kin, and after the lonely despair of the last two years, and his father's wasting agony, the discovery that his grandfather lived took on an importance of inordinate proportion. Even the eerie countenance of the nighted valley seemed a welcoming aspect to the gloom crouching in his heart.

He stepped off the bus and its door hissed closed behind him. Before, a lamppost swarmed by moths illuminated a faded sign reading SESQUA DEPOT. The depot was a single building that served more often as the grocery and gas station. It was closed at this hour, and unlit. A lone figure approached from its shadows, a man Richard recognized from a photograph as his grandfather, older, of course, than the picture had admitted.

Nathan Whitson looked quite dignified in his overcoat and cap and neatly trimmed white whiskers, clasping his cane, the ends of his scarf moving with a breeze. The old gentleman stepped forward as the bus skittered away like a rabbit from a hound. Richard stood in a cloud of mist and exhaust, his pale expression filled with hopeful expectation.

His grandfather's handshake was firm, and warm for all the bitter cold around.

"You're your father's image," the old man said in greeting, his smile the first pleasant thing in Richard's long day. He took one of his grandson's bags and led the way to an old pickup truck.

All along the short ride to a cottage tucked into the woods alongside a calm black lake, the old man asked after news that betrayed an appalling ignorance of life outside the valley. Richard instantly liked dying gentle-mannered oldster and feeling that shadow drawn out of his heart. Why, he even found occasion to laugh!

Over a morning repast of hens' eggs and home-baked bread, they spoke of many things. Eventually the conversation came around to the subject both had been avoiding.

"Your father never liked this valley, Sesqua," the old man told Richard. There was a sadness, but no bitterness, in his mild tone. Richard was still hard-pressed to understand the callousness of his father in never allowing the lad the knowledge and benefits of a grandfather.

"It's an old town. Families have lived here for numerous generations; pioneers considered it their stroke of luck, discovering this fertile valley somehow never claimed by the Indians, who elsewhere were peaceful competitors but still competitors. None questioned this fortune; none asked why Indians shunned a place abundant with game and rich of soil. They just settled in, and it is mostly those same old families who reside on this land.

"Outsiders, for the most part, find the people clannish and unfriendly. They soon leave, just as your father did when he thought himself mature enough to take care of his own life. An old Sesquan like myself finds it difficult to settle elsewhere, the roots and psychic ties run so deep. I tried city life when I married your grandmother. But after she passed on (your father was a wisp of eight years at the time) I longed to return home. Here I've stayed all those years since. And so have all my clan before me."

Nathan's face took on a curious expression, one that caused the young man's heart to beat faster. His grandfather hinted at a mysterious quality about life in Sesqua, and there was the faintest note of urgency when he reached across the table to rest a withered hand on his grandson's wrist, saying: "I had feared the Whitson line would die out of Sesqua with my passing. But now..."

Richard helped his grandfather clear the table of breakfast dishes and insisted on doing the washing. As he performed this domestic activity, be watched out the window over the sink, absorbing the magic of country life. Beneath the window, chickens clucked and scratched at the morning's feed.

A squirrel clung to the bark of a tree, planning her maneuver past the rooster to the spilled grain. Across the small lake no other houses were visible -- only a wall of hemlock spruce with their ragged tips bowed in the manner of prayer or obeisance to the snow-clad mountains beyond, all reflected perfectly in the flat, still waters.

Later, when Nathan returned from outside chores, rubbing hands together and blowing at his chaffed fingers, Richard was invited into the sanctuary of his grandfather's little study. There was a fragrance of aromatic pipe tobaccos mingled with the more familiar scents of spruce and cedar burning in me fireplace. The furniture was slightly dusty, except for the wide deck, which seemed regularly in use.

Old portrait photographs hung in glassed frames upon one wall, some of Richard's father as a boy, more than one of a frail and attractive woman he supposed to be his grandmother. Two walls were built with bookshelves, on which nearly every centimeter of space was packed to capacity. These books dealt with such widely varied topics as North American Indian lore, European and Chinese mythology, archeology, local and Northwest history, and the histories of Puget Sound and the near Pacific including, it appeared, some carefully bound original manuscripts regarding early Northwest expeditions.

Habit made it inconceivable that Nathan could relax behind his desk in that plush seat without a well-chosen pipe of tobacco. While he indulged in all the intricacies of this pleasant, personal tradition, Richard stood regarding the titles on the shelves. Many were in French and Spanish medieval script and looked centuries old. He feared to touch them lest their ancient leather crack and the pages fall to dust.

Pleased by his grandson's obvious interest, Nathan pointed out a particular tome (by no means the oldest) and had it brought to the desk. It was in

relatively modem French, and Richard marveled at his grandfather's multilingual reading ability.

"The French explorer Maurice de Reau penned these pages in his own light script in 1794 -- a decade before Jefferson financed the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Northwest wilderness." He chuckled as he set his spectacles upon his nose and turned through the brittle yellow manuscript in search of a favorite passage. "Poor Maurice! He might have been more beloved by later geographers and historians had they not found him too Poloesque in his prose; as it is, the museums with their decrepit scholars likely wouldn't do so much as catalog one more of these fanciful documents. This, his last imaginative chronicle, never made it back to King Louis (who anyway had been guillotined the year before!), who had commissioned Maurice's services, intending, perhaps, to extend the vast boundaries of the French Louisiana territory. And what became of de Reau, none discovered."

Richard took the armchair beside the oak-top desk and listened intently to his grandfather's translation:

I have come, my cherished and honored King, to a land that makes all the grim occurrences in the Black Forest mere fairy tales passed on by frightened spinsters. There are trees whose sap is blood and toads with the faces of men, pixies with poisonous fangs and laughing devils that fly unseen through the night. There is evidence of all this and other abhorrent truths, for much I've seen with my own eyes and feared for my life more strongly than in any country of my travels. There is an aborigine legend that you would not find so hard to believe if you could but feel the air of this unwholesome place. Two titanic demons (say the natives) met in battle on this unhallowed ground. The Red demon was of goodwill, the White would enslave all humanity, and thus the freedoms of mankind were the stakes. The White demon unleashed all manner of odious beings upon His foe, and still the White was overcome and turned to stone.

Here, Nathan paused to enjoy his fine tobacco and allow the effect of his narrative to impress upon his listener. Though he reiterated the fantasy of this tale, there was nonetheless a tinge of irony in these avowals of falsehood, and Richard was more captivated now than by the ghost stories told on the stormy nights of his childhood. Nathan continued:

The demon-turned-stone the aborigines called Selta, and it is a strange sight to see, a mountain which lends ' credence to the legend. Yet as the story goes, the Red titan could not entirely banish the minions of the White, for they thrive in good proportions and await the day of their master's return from his stone prison. All this is to inform your most gracious majesty that such a land repugnant is not fit for French dominion.

The old man folded the manuscript and rested a hand on its binding. Though he apologized for the terse translation of a passage much more colorful in the original tongue, Richard could not have been more affected. He forced himself to laugh and say, "What would Christmas be without a scary tale?" But the lips of the old man were a hard, serious line within the white, combed whiskers.

The mention of the holiday did restore an iota of cheer, however, and a pleasant change of subject. Richard remarked on the singular lack of holiday decorations in what he'd seen of Sesqua. It seemed hardly the right spirit for a town to let the season pass without a string of colored lights or a tree.

"We celebrate the Yule season differently from folk outside of Sesqua," Nathan explained. "Very few families exchange gifts and we don't succumb to the crass commercialism of wasted electricity and injured trees."

His grandfather went on to explain the spiritual side of Christmas, but Richard had seen as little Christmas spirit as he had decorations. He hadn't really seen the town by day, however, so he let the subject drop as was

Nathan's apparent wont. But of one thing he was certain: he would not entertain the thought of another Christmas without a tree.

That afternoon he explored the good-sized cottage. It was not big, but spacious enough for one old man. In the cramped attic, he found what he had secretly been searching for: a box containing Christmas candles, bulbs, and tinsel -- packed away and long forgotten. He hauled them down to his own small room, determined to bring Christmas back to Sesqua. Or at least to Nathan Whitson.

During that pleasurable week before Christ's birthday, Richard came to know his grandfather and the countryside well. Nathan liked to hunt squirrels, partly because they were a nuisance around the cottage and chicken coop, partly because they made a fine stew and augmented the store of meat. Richard accompanied Nathan on more than one of these hunting expeditions around the lake.

The woods were like a beautiful cathedral, the lake just beginning to freeze around the edges with lovely lacy patterns in the ice. For all the forest's comeliness, Richard was unnerved by the constant silence. Even in winter there ought to be the reassuring sounds of some wildlife, but for two days they hadn't seen so much as a pirating squirrel.

"The drop in temperature," Nathan explained, "has sent the hardiest into hibernation."

Richard excused his unease as the result of city rearing.

On one of these outings, Richard became separated from his grandfather and lost sight of the lake. Completely disoriented, he was on the verge of panic as he found his way through the furiously whipping underbrush. The clearing was a relieving sight when he stumbled upon it, for in its perfect symmetry it seemed a sign of habitation. The ground appeared well-trod. Above, the surrounding trees closed out the sky, so only a few of the sun's fingered rays reached the dappled ground.

A perfect circle of mushrooms encompassed the clearing's only other occupant -- a brilliantly colored red spruce half again as tall as Richard. A perfect, squat, widely branched sturdy conifer, Richard was entirely unfamiliar with the type. Seeing it stand there alone in the trampled circle, the lines of a song he'd heard as a lad ran through his mind:

...for gods in their places
wore smiles on their faces
for pagans who danced on Christmas.

A wind chilled his collar. Something unseen skittered through the perimeters of the clearing (and his vision), the first sign of life that day. He did not believe in premonition, but something made him wheel around into a defensive crouch.

It was only Grandfather Whitson who stood there with his low-caliber rifle coddled in his arms. His face looked stern, more so than Richard had previously seen it.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Richard stood from his foolish crouch, all the fear gone out of him like a child found by its mother. "I... I... was lost."

The old man eyed him as coldly as the weather gripped him, but directly his expression mellowed and he said, "Come along to the house. There'll not be a squirrel adventuring at this temperature."

Richard was only too pleased to oblige. He cast one final look back at the crimson-hued evergreen, and then followed after his grandfather.

He slammed the door of the borrowed truck.

Now, on the street of this quaint small town, Richard could only scoff at his own imagined feelings of doom when he'd been "lost" so near to the cottage. The town of Sesqua consisted of a very few buildings for commerce, nearly half of these boarded up. There was an herb shop. A fish and tackle. The grocery and general store was the largest of the businesses and also served as post office, and two old rustic petroleum pumps stood outside the doors.

Dusk came early in that wintered valley, and Richard had to do his bit-of shopping in haste as the untalkative proprietor was in a hurry to close shop, as other shops had already done.

A pouch of the finest tobacco in stock would have to do for now. If only he'd thought to bring something from the city, but he'd never been one for early shopping, even before Christmas came to be associated with calamity, and death, and nothing worth celebration. Now he was determined to turn his attitude around, for once again he was a man with something of a family to consider!

The subject of Christmas gift-wrap mutually peeved him and the shop’s proprietor, which was not a part of that store's wares. A bit perturbed by the customer service (if you could call it that), Richard left the store with his small purchase. The owner locked up and scurried down the darkening street, not once looking back at the newcomer to Sesqua.

It took no time at all to wander the length of the town. By chance or subconscious design, Richard found himself approaching the run-down nearly gothic mansion sitting on a knoll. "It oughtn't cost a lot to buy," he thought, noting the poor condition of the outer walls and roof. "But it'll cost a fortune to repair." One of the twin gables was nearly devoid of shingles.

He tested the ornamental doorknob. Locked. A back stairway led to a second-story entrance -- *a* padlock on this. He circled and inspected the building, tramping through high grass and the thorns of wild roses. He found a half-rotten length of lumber and broke it while prying boards off a basement window. There was no glass behind the boards. He climbed in.

One by one, he explored the floors. He hadn't thought to bring a flashlight, the venture being impulsive, but his eyes soon adjusted enough to find his way about.

The place was an appalling mess, with rare antique furniture overturned and ruined, scratched and dented walls with torn wallpaper. But the architecture was sound; even the stair banisters were sturdy.

From the broken window of a gable, he looked through the naked branches of the oak to the lightless town and surrounding woods overlooked by the house on the knoll. Brilliance caught his eye: a campfire far away, at the edge of what might be a meadow or cultivated ground. It was too far to tell, but children appeared to be playing ring-around-the-rosy and tossing twigs into the flame. This seemed a dangerous sport, unattended by adults. And -- good Lord! -- were the children naked? Could their parents know they were out this time of evening catching their death of pneumonia?

They danced around the fire like wicked dark creatures, and struck contorted poses, which were distinctly unchildlike. For a moment, a terrible fright clutched at the watcher from the window. A thought glanced through his mind: those don't look like children at all! But he closed some psychological lid on that absurd thought and started to turn away.

But he didn't turn, for the dancing had stopped. The faint "oo na na na na, oo na na na na" chanting ended. Richard pressed against the wall beside the window for, though it was too dark and distant for them to know, he feared they'd stopped their play -- or ritual? -- because they sensed eyes upon them. Carefully, he peered around the corner of the sill. The fire was gone, and without it he could see nothing in the meadow.

Branches of the naked oak scraped at the walls and a cold new wind whistled under the eaves. As he stood looking out, he thought he caught glimpses of two shadows melding into one at the base of the tree. He watched with knitted brow. Then a limb stretching toward his window cracked so very slightly.

The eeriness of the house was suddenly impressed upon him with unmanageable intensity. He fled that place, like a man pursued, running

through the town and locking himself into his grandfather's old pickup and blessing the strong battery and the wheels that took him bouncing down the back roads to the cottage.

He lay awake a long time that night, breathing heavily beneath the comfort of his blankets. He toyed with a blue bulb of glass taken from the cardboard box secretly stowed beneath the bed.

In his mind spun the plans for a brighter day. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. And the day beyond that would find a surprise awaiting grandfather. These thoughts nearly made him happy; for a few hours, at least, on that special morn, he wanted to recapture the innocence of his forsaken childhood.

A rivulet of blood trickled down between the cracks of the bark. The chicken's head dropped to the ground between Nathan's feet, its beak opening and closing. The feathered carcass, hung by tied legs on a nail driven in the tree, twitched madly, as though it felt the pain.

"Not exactly a fancy turkey dinner," his grandfather said, winking. "But she's a big one!"

"She's a beauty," Richard agreed.

Whatever the rest of Sesqua was up to, here at least the Christmas spirit had indeed been wrought anew. Nathan had lived a lot of lonely years in his hermitage on the lake. And the agony of Richard's loss was still hard for him to bear. Together, these once-grim men brought laughter to each other's heart.

The only serious moment came while Richard was helping Nathan prepare the feast. There were onions and celery and green pepper to cut into fine pieces, potatoes to peel, dried bread crusts to crumble and all manner of little things to busy a grandson while the Chief Cook labored.

Richard said, "I saw children dancing in a field last night."

A knife struck the floor. Nathan bent to pick it up but betrayed no lack of calm. "Did you, now? Well, children do play."

Richard was searching for words that wouldn't make him sound like a maniac. "Yes, but, these children were different. I didn't see them well, you understand, but... They were *naked.* Ice around the lake and children dancing naked?"

"Perhaps," Nathan's rational voice ventured, "it was an illusion of reflected firelight. They might actually have been well clothed."

He almost accepted that, wanting to believe any logical explanation at all. But there was still something wrong.

"Did I mention any fire?"

"Was there one?" The old man was too casual.

"Yes. But... I didn't tell you that. What aren't you telling me, grandfather? What's *wrong* with the people in this valley? You're afraid I'll go back to the city -- but I have a right to know!"

Cornered, the oldster cleaned his hands on a towel and bid his grandson follow him to the study. There he pulled down a book of Northwest lore published in the early nineteenth century, illustrated with weird steel-plate engravings.

To one illustration in particular he turned. It might have depicted the solstice ceremony of an ancient European earth-goddess cult, but it was not so tame as those pagan rites. And the fauna was distinctly North American.

It was a picture of a short, broad evergreen, around which a ring of naked imps -- or children with teeth filed sharp -- stood arm in arm. Above the tree, a great winged creature (perhaps an oversized bald eagle depicted by an artist who had never seen one) held a beaver in its talons and let the blood from its pierced belly drip onto the tree.

But most striking was the background of the illustration. It was unquestionably Mount Selta, with two eye slits added for effect.

"A popular legend," said Nathan. "So popular, in fact, that it has become the commonest of children's games to act out the legend."

Richard felt the idiot. Until that moment, he'd thought his grandfather was revealing some legitimate and incredible horror of Sesqua Valley. But it was only an elaborate children's game. And why not? Children of Europe originally devised ring-around-the-rosy during the era of the Black Plague, and the line "Ashes, ashes, all fall down" referred to people dying in the streets, and the ashes from cremations. In their innocence, the grimmest situation was just another source of play.

"And that's all I saw?"

Instead of answering, Nathan patted his grandson's shoulder and said, "Let's get that dinner ready, shall we?" And the day progressed lightheartedly.

That day was a busy one, and wearying for a man of Nathan's years. Richard was only too pleased to see his grandfather apologetically retire early. It had been a pleasant day for both, and Richard intended to return the favor on the morrow. Armed with a flashlight from the kitchen drawer and hatchet from the woodbox, he slipped silently from the house and into the black of night.

He had made careful note of the route when Grandfather led him from the clearing that other time, for he knew there could be no more beautiful a specimen for a Christmas tree in these woods. He severed it at the base and hauled it back to the cottage. Once, he shone his light behind, thinking he heard a mournful whimper like that of a dog. There was nothing. With slow deliberation, he managed the tree through the door with a minimum of rustling needles and scraping limbs. Balanced on a chair, he was about to place the Star of Bethlehem on the tree's top when a harsh voice interrupted his endeavor.

"What have you done?"

The glass star fell from his fingers and shattered on the floor.

"Grandfather..."

"What have you done!"

"It's a surprise. For Christmas. I..." His voice faded away. This expression of anger and disgust was the last thing he'd expected. He felt himself at once shamed and contemptible, and he didn't even know why.

"You're an outsider. You couldn't have known," his grandfather whispered in a fatalistic manner, muttering more to himself than to Richard. His face was ashen, nearly as white as his beard, and he seemed in frantic search for some way out, some answer. "It's too late to change it now. But perhaps I can save you." Mechanically, he shuffled in slippers and robe to the gun rack, took down his rifle. "A squirrel gun will never stop them but..."

"Grandfather! Do you sleep-walk? I think you're having a nightmare!"

Richard shook the man, and indeed he did seem to wake from a dream. The anger, confusion, and terror vanished from his face; color returned. "Yes. Yes. I was dreaming. It's late, lad, we should be in bed. The tree is very pretty, but I'll see it better by morning's light. Come."

Leery of this sudden change, Richard nonetheless allowed himself to be led to his room. He bid his grandfather a good night and closed the door.

He lay atop the covers, fondling the tobacco pouch that tomorrow would be his grandfather's. It seemed a trivial thing now to give, and his tree was spoiled as well. His mind fled toward the same depression which last year had so incapacitated him. Outside the door, his grandfather still shuffled about fretfully, but Richard was too lost in his own despair to hear, to care.

If he slept, it wasn't for long. A loud crash startled him to awareness. A window shattering? Nathan was shouting, "Get back! Get back!" Richard was on his feet the instant he realized someone, or something, had indeed come through the window, and rocked the cottage in so doing. He tried the

door, but Nathan had locked it from the outside and pushed a chest against it.

"Grandfather! Grandfather!"

He rammed the door with his shoulder, and knew that it would give with a few more tries. But when the rifle fired, he froze in horror of the shrieking obscenity that answered the report. Whatever made that cry, *it was no beast he knew.*

With a cowardice that wound haunt him all his life more intensely than any Sesquan monstrosity, he stood and listened through the night. His grandfather's screaming ended in a frothy gurgle after what seemed like hours. The flapping of some pinioned beast, perhaps a gigantic bat, resounded through the cottage. The stomping of myriad tiny feet dancing around the severed tree, the whining, childlike voices singing a monotonous litany.

All through the night it raged, those hellish festivities, and Richard Whitson crouched shivering and afraid behind his door, weeping silent salty tears.

As the dawn approached, the sounds from the main room faded. Things padded or flew away from the blasphemed site of the cottage, and Richard cautiously pried loose the lock and forced the door open enough to squeeze through.

The room was in shambles, the kitchen window broken inward. Blood smeared the floor and walls. Richard approached the sink, glass crunching under his shoes, and looked toward the hunched mountains. Against the violet of the dawn, the silhouette of some great-winged bird or bat was plain above the lake, and it let loose the torso clutched by talons so that the body fell and upset the water's icy stillness.

Richard Whitson turned from that impossible sight and fought the urge to retch. He stumbled like a man blinded by his terror back into the living room, there to gaze once more at the product of his crime -- that once-beautiful Christmas tree now so obviously ghastly in its color. His battle to

keep his stomach down was lost at the sight atop the tree. For where would have been the star rested the brutally torn head of his grandfather.

The Pacific High

Grant Fjermedal

The last example of a Cthulhu Mythos-inspired story comes from the pen (or word processor) of Grant Fjermedal. As a champion sailboat racer, he has chosen a setting he knows inside and out.

> *Grant is the author of* Magic Bullets, *about the leading edge of medicine, and* The Tomorrow Makers, *about robotics, both from Macmillan. He's a science reporter for* Omni *as well. His interest in science will serve him in good stead when he finally gets around to the often-threatened point of giving up nonfiction and turning to the far less lucrative area of science fiction. Despite this predilection toward the sciences, his first published story is all-out horror, commissioned especially for* Fantasy Macabre #77, 7985. *It's a pretty shattering tale from the hand of an author generally noted for his upbeat charm.*

Excerpts from a journal washed ashore on an Oregon beach:

July 31:

Went up the mast in a bosun's chair to check the rigging. Took plenty of duct tape with me. At the top I opened a can of Hamm's and enjoyed drinking it as I looked down upon the other boats moored in Victoria Harbor. There will be just thirteen boats in this year's race to Maui, but considering the distance (2,300 miles) and the time it takes (two weeks in a fast year, four weeks in a slow year) it isn't surprising that so few go.

Besides, sailing on the ocean, especially at night, can scare the hell out of you.

August
1900 hrs:

Well, we're under way. We won the start but were soon passed by other boats as we worked our way out to the mouth of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and then into the Pacific Ocean.

This isn't the boat we had planned on chartering for the race -- by any stretch of the imagination. But the price was right. Rather than pooling our funds and chartering a racing machine like a Frers 50 for $30,000, we ended up with our low-tech wooden sloop for free.

The boat is gorgeous to look at. It is forty-eight feet long, all mahogany and teak, with a graceful overhanging transom and a bow that carries the sheer line up nicely. She seems to have emerged from another era.

August 2
0800 hrs:

Unfortunately we found out something about that era yesterday when seven members of a Jewish organization came down with signs and a banner to protest the participation of our boat in the race. They claim she was built for a German officer in the SS during World War II, and that a lot of slave laborers died during the course of its meticulous construction.

It was a chilling way to begin the race. Matthew, our skipper, tried to laugh it off, but some pretty eerie things were said. I guess all of this means her name must be German; we thought it was Hawaiian. She's called *Cthulhu Maiden,* but we've been calling her Hulu Girl. I don't know what we will call her now.

Counting Matthew, there are six of us on board. For these long ocean races, we leave it to Matthew to find a boat, divide the costs for charter, insurance, and supplies and tell us what we owe.

So we thought he was kidding when he said some old man had come up to him at the Sloop Tavern and offered him the use of a boat for free.

August 3
1230 hrs:

The Cthulhu Maiden really cranks! We have the spinnaker up, with the wind well aft. She has a nice beam to her, plenty of waterline, and with such powerful waves to ride; I'm nearly intoxicated with how good the boat feels.

Ibid.
1500 hrs:

My earlier entries might have made the beginning of the trip sound too negative. Now we joke about the protestors. And since none of us can really figure out the correct pronunciation of Cthulhu, and because we're tired of calling her Hulu, we have taken on one of the curses that were shouted at her as we left the dock: *The Cutthroat Maiden.*

Ibid.
1630 hrs:

It's nice to have no land in sight, just the waves, the clouds, and the horizon. You never see the other boats on this race. The ocean is so vast that a different tract swallows each of us.

Ibid.
1735 hrs:

Edward, our navigator, has been giving Matthew a good-naturedly hard time about the bulky old "tubetronics" that came with the boat. The ship-to-

shore radio is gorgeous to look at -- beautifully encased within intricately carved cabinetry of some strange wood that has a most unusual grain, and color similar to mahogany -- yet so very red!

Matthew could have brought his Loran and Satellite Navigation units from his own boat, but the old man who offered us the *Cutthroat* had three quaint but unyielding stipulations:

One: We have to use his, and only his, navigational and electronic equipment.

Two: We have to use the boat's original sails. (This has us somewhat worried because while everyone else is using mylar, kevlar, or at least dacron, we are using Egyptian cotton that looks like something you would wrap a mummy in. The sails are nearly covered with strange writings which must be in Egyptian. We call them Egyptian Death Shrouds -- because they'll kill our chances of winning.)

Three: We have to sail the rhumbline course to Hawaii, which means going through the Pacific High.

This is the shortest way of getting to Hawaii, but this perpetual area of unusually high atmospheric pressure means that there can be very little wind. We are assuming all the other boats will hug the West Coast until they hit the Trade Winds off San Francisco or Los Angeles.

Navigator Edward doesn't like the idea of somebody else telling him which course to choose. But Edward, who is a professor of mathematics at the University of Washington, concedes that this might be one of those rare years for sailing through the High. For the past month the atmospheric pressure in the High hasn't been high. So we might be able to ride the wind right through it.

Before the race we got together to talk about the boat and about the three stipulations. Not even Matthew knows much about the boat's owner. We figure he's some rich bastard who has paid moorage and insurance on this boat for decades and now that he finally has the time to use it, he's too old to do the race himself.

But he doesn't realize how old his sails are, how horribly outdated his electronics are, or how risky his course across the Pacific High can be. He does know how to inspire, though. He somehow sneaked aboard the night before the race and left a note written in a beautiful hand: "You six are a gift to my world."

August 4
0730 hrs:

The sailing is wonderful. These old cotton sails seem to be doing all right. The *Cutthroat* has a nice big steering wheel covered in unusually supple leather.

Ibid.
1115 hrs:

Brian is starting to spook me a bit. At age nineteen, he's the youngest on the boat and the least experienced. I'm not wild about trying to cross the High. (In an earlier era the price for getting trapped in this windless zone could be death.) But Brian has what I would call a deep foreboding.

Ibid.
2305 hrs:

Nothing is blacker than the ocean on a stormy night. The clouds block out the moonlight and stars. All movement is done on hands and knees with safety lines. Even then you can be swept across the deck. Waves become vicious and cunning.

August 5
0800 hrs:

The wind is still blowing, but by day the ocean doesn't seem quite so menacing. I'm no longer worried about our course. The Pacific High isn't an absolute. There are times when the high pressure dissipates, the millibars flatten out, and a sailboat can go gliding through it without any problem.

We are nearing the High now and the wind is getting stronger, not lighter. It appears that the old man who owns the boat (no one really knows his name, so we call him The Old One) should get a Nobel Prize for predicting weather.

Ibid.
1200 hrs:

We've confirmed it by radio. We are the only boat that will try to cross the High. This makes us happy. The Old One chose the perfect year to do it. We should be able to blast out of the High with a huge lead.

August 6
0630 hrs:

Last night our ship-to-shore stopped working. Johnson, who is our resident boat mechanic, is probing its archaic vacuum tubes.

Ibid.
1230 hrs:

The wind is easing some, which is good news, as it had been building up toward thirty knots and we were getting worn out. We seem to be running into some fog.

August 7
0600 hrs:

The wind is still with us. It's dropped to about twelve knots, but that still gives us plenty of push. I just wish the fog would go away.

Ibid.
1215 hrs:

It's fun to watch Johnson work on the radio. He's twenty-six years old (most of us are in our early to late thirties) and has been playing with things mechanical all his life. Sailing is nice in that it provides a common ground for people from a wide variety of occupations. Fortunately I'm the only life insurance salesman on board. Matthew is an aeronautical engineer for Boeing when he's not skippering raceboats. We've also got Darrell, a pharmacist. I'm not sure what Brian does.

Johnson is the wildest of us on shore, or at least it would seem that way if you believed all of his stories. He's the most blue-collar of us and has a mean streak that he manages to keep under-control.

He is absolutely captivated by the radio. He claims he has never seen anything like the vacuum tubes it has. All the electronic codings are different. Perhaps the tubes are Egyptian, too. I think his pride is hurt because he can't get it running, so he makes it sound as if the radio had just been beamed down to the boat from another planet.

August 8
0600 hrs:

When I woke up this morning our Egyptian sails had been dropped to the deck. There is no wind. Only fog. We are deep into the High.

Ibid.
1800 hrs:

I can scarcely believe it. Twelve hours now without a breath of wind.

August 9
1200 hrs:

Matthew and Edward spent most of yesterday going over charts and two-week-old weather maps, trying to conjure wind.

Ibid.
1500 hrs:

Johnson is becoming a pain. Everybody is kind of edgy. We are in the heart of the High. Edward watches the drift collecting around us and says some things are carried into the High that never escape.

August 10
0615 hrs:

I don't know where in hell it came from, but there seems to be a lot of floating seaweed that has been bunching around the boat. Since seaweed doesn't grow in the middle of the ocean, this stuff must have migrated hundreds of miles from the Pacific Coast, or nearly a thousand miles from the Aleutian Islands. We started the engine today to recharge the batteries. Race rules state the engine must be in neutral, but Brian was nearly frantic to put the engine in gear.

I joined Brian, but Matthew and Edward wanted no part of it and Johnson got belligerent. So we will wait. Wait for the wind. And, through the fog, watch the thick carpet of aged seaweed gather around us.

Ibid.
1230 hrs:

There's nothing to do. We sit around getting on one another's nerves.

Ibid.
1815 hrs:

The seaweed stinks of death. It gets thicker and thicker around us. I don't know from where it comes, but I wish it would go back.

August 11
1215 hrs:

I'm really depressed. My life has been a complete waste. There is so much promise, always that tantalizing promise, of how my life could be if I could just be more organized and disciplined and follow through on all that I plan. But I don't follow through; I just stagger along from one self-induced crisis to another. I know I will feel better some day but for now I just feel like such a complete and utter failure that it seems like a bad joke that I'm alive.

August 12
1500 hrs:

Brian and I have been spending a lot of time down below. He's as depressed as I am and that has become something we can share. Outside, in the cockpit, Johnson is being his obnoxious macho self.

August 13
1714 hrs:

Edward is getting as flaky as Johnson. He pours over the celestial navigation tables that the Old One sent us, and claims he is finding entries for planets that don't exist.

Meanwhile our skipper, Matthew, is in a daze. He's burrowed back into our tunnel of a sail locker, and wrapped himself in the Egyptian Death Shrouds. He won't come out.

August 14
1200 hrs:

It was too much for Brian and I today to take when Johnson started the engine to charge the batteries. Brian went to the helm and pushed us into gear. Johnson freaked and started pounding on him. I tried to stop Johnson and then he pounded on me. What scared the hell out of me -- and this is a fear that is staying with me -- is that nobody interceded. Nobody stopped the fight! Brian and I were screaming and yelling for help, but it was like nobody else on the boat gave a shit. When Johnson finally stopped, I helped Brian down below and we tried to clean each other up.

Then something odd happened. Johnson went to turn off the engine, and it refused to die. It was as if the engine itself wanted to get out of the High. Brian and I just laid in our bunks listening, hoping that Matthew and Edward or any of the others would take the hint and kick the boat back into gear.

Johnson took it as a personal affront. He tracked down the fuel line cutoff valve to stop the flow of diesel. Even then the engine kept running. Then there came gasps. And there came such terrible chokes and violent shakes that it truly felt as if Johnson were strangling the poor machine with his own hands. It was as though he were murdering something heroic, something that was better than any of us, something that was in its own small way trying to save us all.

August 15
1300 hrs:

The seaweed is getting so thick! Maybe we couldn't have motored through it anyway. Nobody else seems to register on how odd it is to find acres of thickly matted seaweed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, but Brian and I agree that it just shouldn't be here.

August 16
1025 hrs:

Every day the sun gets hotter, the seaweed gets thicker, and this boat becomes more like a prison. Johnson is right at home.

Everyone is lethargic, but when Edward and Darrell are up on deck they seem naturally able to engage in the kind of stupid jock talk that keeps them in Johnson's good graces.

Ibid.
1215 hrs:

I'm hiding my journal now, as I realize it might not be so great if certain people found it.

Ibid.
1520 hrs:

The idiots out on deck have found a new sport. Walking on water. This isn't quite as miraculous as I make it sound. The seaweed is now so thick that Johnson went out walking -- crawling actually -- on it. He came back to the boat, took off his shoes and clothes, and then leaped back onto the muck

shouting, "Oooh! This feels good!" I watched him from a porthole, as Brian and I haven't been on deck since the altercation.

Ibid.
1600 hrs:

I crawled into the sail locker and again tried to wake up Matthew. Johnson is taking command.

August 17
1115 hrs:

Every now and then Edward comes in from the seaweed to study the celestial tables. He, too, is naked and dripping with weedy green slime. And he, too, speaks, apparently to himself, about how good it feels. Only the Old One's chart can compete with the lure of the seaweed, for Edward now claims he's trying to figure out where his new planets would be by working backward from the Local Apparent Noon columns.

Ibid.
1400 hrs:

I slept for quite a while today. The only escape. Woke to much yelling and screaming. Was just more water walking. Brian and Matthew and I are the only ones that haven't gone in. Johnson threw Darrell into the seaweed to make him try it. Once they get into the muck, they don't want to come out. Looking out the porthole now, Darrell, too, has shed his clothes. They are rolling in it, humping the slime, and getting frenzied in a savage way. Must wake up Matthew. We need a skipper.

Ibid.
1430 hrs:

Finally got Matthew to crawl out of the death shroud, but instead of settling things down, he jumped over the side. Now Johnson is calling for Brian. I've locked the companionway from the inside and fastened the fore and aft hatches.

Ibid.
1615 hrs:

Brian is out of it. Everyone is pounding on the hull calling his name. Say they will kill him if he doesn't jump in. I've got the flare gun, but if I shoot, I risk burning a hole through the bottom.

The cabin is getting creepy. Over the past several days I've been studying the grotesque carvings that decorate the interior of the boat. None of us even noticed the carvings until we got near the High. Now it seems as if the atmospheric pressure, fog, or something is causing the wood to swell and blister and this stretching of the wood is making the carved characters grow and become uncomfortably three-dimensional. I must be going nuts.

Ibid.
1627 hrs:

Shit! Johnson just tried to climb on deck but screamed from pain when his feet touched the deck. Their voices are lower now. The others say the boat hurts too touch.

Ibid.
1745 hrs:

They are swearing at me and telling me that I have to bring out Brian. They say they want to talk to both of us. That nothing will happen.

Ibid.
2030 hrs:

It's getting dark. Voices are going away. Don't know why they haven't come back on board. If the decks were too hot during the day, they surely must be cool enough by now. Johnson, Edward, Darrell, and Matthew have been over the side for hours now. If it weren't for the seaweed they would all be long dead of hypothermia.

I have to sleep.

August 18
0415 hrs:

They got Brian. I woke up to slapping sounds. They were throwing seaweed into the cockpit and onto the decks. The seaweed has done something to their feet. They had to cover the decks before they could come aboard, but when they did they broke down the hatch cover and jumped inside. Before Johnson and Darrell could reach us they started jumping up and down and screaming until Matthew and Edward threw seaweed inside the cabin for them to stand on.

1 abandoned Brian. I escaped through the forehatch and climbed the mast as high as the first spreaders. Johnson tried to climb after me but his skin stuck to the aluminum. Horrible scream before he jumped back into the seaweed beds.

Poor Brian. They pulled him out of the cabin, ripped off his clothes, and then swinging him by his arms and legs threw him over the side. While Johnson and the others were having their fun with him, I came down, fished

out the mop and swabbed the seaweed off the boat. What I've been calling fog now seems more like gases arising out of the seaweed.

I got the bosun's chair, some food and water, and created a nest for myself at the spreaders.

August 19
0515 hrs:

Spent the night in the bosun's chair lashed to the mast, but sleep was impossible. Weird babbling and splashing and thumping all night. But toward dawn it became nearly silent.

Brian is the only one still laying on top of the matted bed. The rest are vertical and mostly submerged. Floating like corks, but very little motion. Johnson is sunk nearly to his chin. Matthew, who, next to Brian, has been in the least amount of time, is floating the highest, with most of his upper torso clear. I call to them but Brian is the only one who answers. He says I have to come in. He says I will like it.

The rest are babbling to themselves, nearly purring. No motion except for their lips, and their eyes, which keep rolling insanely. Matthew is the closest to the boat. Will try to get him back aboard.

Ibid. 1200 hrs: What the hell is going on! It's been two hours now and I can hardly think. Something bad has happened. It must be a chemical spill. Or Hell is located at the bottom of the sea.

Ibid.
1345 hrs:

I've been too sick to write. Also, I've been busy, trying to save someone who must certainly be already dead. I'm now continuing this journal out of a sense of duty. When I'm done I will wrap it in as much plastic and duct

tape as I can find and lash it to our man overboard float and flag. Whatever is out there doesn't seem to eat plastic. If I don't make it, perhaps my journal will.

Matthew was the closest to the boat. I could see he was alive, but he didn't respond when I pleaded to him to get back on board. So' I broke out the life-sling and fastened it under his arms and around his chest. Attached the shackle to a halyard, ran the halyard to a primary winch, and began to lift him aboard. I anticipated a heavy load and put all my weight against the handle. I watched him and he watched me as I continued to winch. He wouldn't budge. The halyard ran from the top of the mast and the boat heeled over from the pressure. Matthew was smiling. He was purring: "Lalala. Lalalala." I cranked some more and then he was gone.

I screamed when he hit me. And I screamed more and more as he dangled in the air dripping upon me. His feet and his legs were bare of all flesh. Remnants of tendons flailed his bones.

His pelvis was stripped of flesh. His stomach and intestines were gone. The ribs up to the point where he floated were exposed. Only his heart and lungs were still covered by flesh. Yet he was alive.

Half man. Half skeleton. His hands and arms to just above his elbows were bare bones. Yet still he moved them. And he smiled and sang. And from these motions he swung back and forth from the halyard, hanging from the sling, twisting about just above the deck. And I crawled away vomiting and screaming. I sought a place to hide, but there was no place to hide.

I passed out for thirty minutes. When I came to he was still dangling from the sling, with nervous twitches from tattered tendons; his bones clattered with the hollow acoustic sound of a bamboo wind chime. And still he lived.

Ibid.
1650 hrs:

Just went to the winch, untied the halyard, and began to lower what was left of Matthew. But at the point that the bones of his toes touched the deck, I lost courage and tied the winch off.

I went down below, got a knife, and began to cut long narrow strips from the Egyptian sails. After an hour of this I went back outside to wrap the bones that were so hideously exposed. When Matthew's skeleton kicked out at the touch of its foot, I screamed.

It took two hours to complete the wrapping of Matthew. When I was finished, I went back to the winch and untied the halyard. There he was: somewhere between being a mummy and a skeleton, still hanging in the sling. Only his eyes and mouth moved. His eyes lolled from sky to sea and then to me. From his lips came the same cat-purr of a contented song. I lowered him onto the deck. I recoiled in horror as his limbs began to shake. His legs disabled, he rolled himself over onto what remained of his chest, and like a partially cocooned maggot wiggled himself toward the side of the boat. I was still backing away when he reached his destination and slipped head first into the weeds.

I called to Brian. Tried to explain. Brian said the seaweed was good. He said it was soothing. He wouldn't come out.

Ibid.
1820 hrs:

Brian is still calling to me. I think it is time to launch my journal. I still don't understand what is happening.

Jack in the Box

Ramsey Campbell

Ramsey Campbell is certainly one of the top ten best-selling horror novelists today. What is more, he may well be, within that elite, the only one who can be said to be not merely a best-seller but a thoroughly artistic writer, with an intensely personal and honest vision that is essential if horror is to be anything but cheap stuff.

> *For whatever reason -- possibly for the joy of it, since there's more to life than sales figures -- he has always remained generous to the small presses. He is interviewed regularly by the editors of little magazines and contributes exceedingly fine stories on a regular basis. Stories can be found in Nyctalops, Ghosts & Scholars, Shayol, Whispers, HPL Tribute, Crypt of Cthulhu, Grue, Etchings & Odysseys, and Fantasy Tales, to name a few. A longtime activist in the British Fantasy Society, "Jack in the Box" is but one of his contributions to the Society's journal Dark Horizons. Like most of the stories in this anthology, it has never before been reprinted.*

When you awake they've turned out the lights in your cell. It feels as if the padded walls have closed in; if you moved you'd touch them. They want you to scream and plead, but you won't. You'll lie there until they have to turn the lights on.

You're glad and proud of what you did. You remember the red spilling from the nurse's throat. You never liked his eyes; they were always watching and ready to tell you that he knew what you were. The others pretended it was their job not to be shocked by what you did before they brought you here, but he never pretended. You can see the red streaming down his shirt and glueing it to his skin. You relax into memory. It's been so long.

You can go back as far as you like, but you can't remember a time when you didn't kill. Although you can't remember much before you were a soldier, and even that period seems to consist of explosive flashes of dead faces and twisted metal and limbs -- until you reach the point where a pattern begins.

It was at the edge of the jungle. You were stumbling along, following the tracks of a tank. You'd been shot in the head, but your legs were still plodding. There was a luminous crimson sky and against it trees stood splintered and charred. Suddenly, among the ruts, you thought you saw a red reflection of the sky. You stood swaying, trying to make it out, and eventually, mixed with the churned earth and muddy stubble of grass, you saw enough of an outline to realize it was a man. The pattern of the tank-tracks was etched on him in red. You leaned closer, reaching toward the red, and maybe that's when it began.

You wonder why you can't hear any sounds outside your cell, not even the savage murmur of the tropical night that always filters in. Your head turns a little, searching, but your memory has regained its hold. When the army discharged you and paid your meager wage you returned to the city. The city doctor did his best for your wound, so he said, but shook his head and recommended you to see someone else who knew more about the effects. In the end you didn't. You were too confused by how the city and the people looked to you.

It was the red that confused you. The city was full of red; it was everywhere you looked. But it wasn't real red, not the red that trickled tantalizingly on the very edge of your mind. And the people were wrong; they looked unreal, like zombies. You knew that if zombies were real; they never came into the city by day, they stayed in the jungle. That wasn't what was wrong with the people. You felt as if the most important part of them was hidden.

One evening as you came into your room you caught sight of a red glint within the wall. It was a fragment of the sunset trapped for a moment in a crack. At once you knew how to satisfy the yawning frustration you'd felt ever since your return to the city, knew how to complete the sunset: you must answer it in red. You cut your forearm with a razor. The red responded, but it hurt, and that was wrong. It hadn't hurt before.

You knew what to do, but you had to make yourself. Each evening when the sky was crimson you went out, the razor folded in your pocket. The tropical evening settled heavily about you, and the shadows in which you hid were warm, but each time you soothed yourself into courage and surged forth from ambush you heard witnesses approaching. It was worse than a jungle ambush, because here your people wouldn't praise you if you succeeded, they'd arrest you.

You went farther from home, into the poorest areas. There was so much death here you had the cunning notion that what you did might almost pass unremarked. At last, one evening when the crimson light was just about to drain away into the ground, you saw a young girl hurrying toward you down an alley. Her eyes were specks of reflected red, making her shadowy face into a mask, which you didn't need to see as human. It was as if she were a receptacle for the last drops of red. She was almost upon you when you swooped, your hands grubbing in your pockets for the razor. You'd left it at home. But now you were pressing her face into your chest to stifle her cries, and even without the razor you managed to make the red come.

After that it was easier. You knew now why you'd been confused when you looked at people: because all the time you had been seeing them as pipes full of red, and you couldn't think why. You could look at them without wanting to tap them except when the sky was calling, and then you made sure you were in the slums. During the day you stayed in your room with the curtains drawn, because outside you might have been stopped for questioning. When you went out you didn't take the razor, which might have betrayed you if you had ever been searched. You never were, although the slum people were complaining that a monster was preying on them. Most of what they said wasn't believed. They admitted believing in zombies, which city people never did.

You can't remember most of the people you caught. They were only shadows making stifled noises, moans, squeaks, and the final desperate gargle. The older ones often seemed dry, children were surprisingly full. You do remember the last one, an old man who giggled and squirmed as he drained. You were still watching the glistening stream when men came at

you from both ends of the alley. When you tried to get up they battered you down and dragged you away.

That was how you came here. You're becoming restless, and your mind is nagging, nagging: they would never turn out the light in your cell, because then they couldn't watch you. But your frustration is urging you on; it wants you to see the most recent and most vivid red, the nurse's.

He was from the slums. You could tell that by the way he talked. Perhaps you'd caught one of his relatives, and mat was why he tried to kill you. You never saw that in his eyes, only a horror of what you were. But just at dawn you saw him tiptoe into your cell, carrying a straightjacket. No doubt he expected you to be asleep. You were tired, and he managed to restrain you before you saw the sharply pointed bulge beneath his jacket. But you still remembered how to bite, and you tore his neck. As he fumbled gurgling into the corridor the sunlight through the window beyond your door streamed around his body, and two spikes of light pierced your eyes. There your memory ends.

You're half satisfied, half excited, and frustrated by the weight of the dark. You feel penned. Then you realize that you can't feel the straightjacket. They may have left you in darkness but at least they've freed you of that. Roused by your memories, you stretch before getting up to stalk around your cell, and your hand touches a wall. You recoil, and then you snarl at yourself and move your other arm. It touches a wall, too.

All of a sudden you're roaring with rage and fear and arching your body as if it can burst you out of your prison, because you know that what has been pressing down on your face isn't only darkness. You aren't in your cell at all. You're in a coffin.

At last you manage to calm yourself, and lie throbbing. You try to think clearly, as you had to in the jungle and afterward in the slums. You're sure the nurse has done this to you. The gap in your memory feels like a blackout. Perhaps he succeeded in poisoning you. He must have persuaded the others that you were dead. In this climate you'd be buried quickly.

You throw yourself against the lid of the coffin, inches above your face. You hear earth trickling faintly by outside for a moment, and then there's nothing but the padded silence. You tear at the cheap padding until you feel it rip. A nail breaks and pain flares like a distant beacon. It gives you a sense of yourself again, and you try to plan.

You manage to force your arms back until the palms of your hands are pressed against the lid almost above your shoulders. Already your forearms are beginning to ache, and your upper arms crush your ribs. Your face feels as if it's trapped in a dwindling pocket of air by your limbs. Before panic can reach you, you're thinking of how the nurse's face will look when you reach him. You begin to push against the lid.

The first time there's the merest stirring of earth outside the coffin. You rest your cramped arms for a moment and push again. There's nothing. You don't know how many coffin nails nor what weight of earth you're trying to shift. You thrust your elbows against the sides of the coffin and heave. Nothing except the silent pendulous darkness. If the lid rather than the nails gives way, the whole weight of earth above will pour in on top of you. Pain kindles your arms, and you lever while they shudder with the effort.

Then the worst thing you could have imagined happens. The weight above you increases. You feel it at the height of your effort, and you're sure it isn't the weakening of your arms. For a moment you think it's the nurse, standing on your grave in case you try to escape. Then another idea occurs to you. It may be a delirious hope, but you force yourself to rest your arms on your chest, crossed and pulsing. You listen.

For a long time you can't hear anything. You resist the urge to test the weight on the lid again, because by now you've forgotten how it felt before. You don't even know whether you would be able to hear what you're listening for.

The darkness thumbs your eyes, and false light swirls on them.

Then you think you heard it. You strain all your nerves, and after a stretched time during which you seem to hang poised on darkness it comes again: a faint distant scraping in the earth above you. You have a last nightmare

glimpse of the nurse digging down to make sure you're dead. But you know who are the only people who dig up fresh corpses. They've come to make you into a zombie. You lie waiting, massaging your cramped arms and tensing yourself. Will they be surprised enough not to use their spades as weapons?

When you hear metal strike the lid you're ready. But when the first nails pull free and the lid creaks up, light pours in with a sifting of earth. For a second you freeze, trapped. But it isn't torchlight, only daylight. The gap in your memory was daylight, or perhaps it was death. To you they've become the same. You realize that one sound you haven't been hearing is the sound of your own breath.

You leap up and pull one of the startled men into the coffin until you're ready for him. Then you clasp the other to you, unlipping your fangs, thinking: red.

Envoy: The Scythe of Dreams

Sleepers are mangled by the scythe of dreams;
every spastic turning takes a knife.
Out of childhood's thicket creeps the ghost
we thought was banished with the hopscotch squares.
Out of the drunken tunnel of our loves
the old sad terrors slowly reel.
Fears have flaming faces; gains are lost.
Naked in our nightmare need, we know at last
the fissures never filled, the crevices we kept.
We glimpse again with eyes that lose their lids
the grey ineffable ghoul of all our days.

-- *Joseph Payne Brennan,*
Sixty Selected Poems,
1985

Appendix I:
How to Publish Your Own Shoestring Horror Magazine

Peggy Nadramia

Before you begin, question your sanity. Do you really love horror fiction? You'll be reading lots, much of it bad. Do you mind losing some money on printing, supplies, and postage? Reaching into your pocket will become your second-most-performed gesture, the one right after clipping rejection slips on manuscripts.

Getting the Stories: You can't start a magazine without something to publish, and unless you intend to fill your magazine with your own work, which is considered very tacky, you'll need to solicit manuscripts. A quick and effective way is placing an announcement in Scavenger's Newsletter, 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, Kansas 66523-1329. It specializes in market news about small horror magazines. If you read the established horror magazines (and you'd better) you can contact the editors and ask them to shove writers off on you. Editors will generally share addresses if there are two or three individuals you know you'd like to contact, making a direct plea for a story. If you've the chutzpa, go to fantasy, sf, and horror conventions in your region, meet all the writers in your vicinity, and convince them to write for you. Once you're rolling and have an issue published, send copies to authors you'd especially like to get stories from. If your product looks nice and reads well, you'll not find it very hard to attract more submissions than you could ever hope to publish; so be careful not to accept so much so quickly that better manuscripts received later must be backlogged indefinitely, or rejected.

Getting Artwork: Mention in Scavenger's Newsletter that you'll be needing illustrations and use the same methods to meet or find addresses for artists. Send photocopies of the stories to whatever artist(s) you've deemed appropriate. Give a deadline (a month is reasonable), because without one, the artist will probably never get around to it. Also, if you want him/her to concentrate on a particular scene or image in the story, say so. Example: "I loved the dangling tongues and the postule-faced creature in the samples you sent. I know you'll do a good job with the tentacled gloppy thing

described on pg. 12." Give the cover assignment to an artist whose work you particularly enjoy. Be sure to stipulate the exact size requirements; one of the hallmarks of the beginner's magazine is the illustration that floats, lost, in the middle of too large a page.

Typesetting: There are many ways to typeset a magazine, using the term loosely. There's the good ol' typewriter, or a quality laser-printer for your top-grade word processor. If you're a terrible typist and have no close friends or relatives who are any better, you'd better get the typesetting done professionally; nothing gets you thrown to the wolves faster than loads of typographical errors or poor appearance. However, if you're reasonably proficient with the keyboard, you can type or typeset the thing yourself and save a few hundred dollars. You can use them when you go shopping for a printer.

Printing: How to get it cheap but good? Make up a specification sheet (size, page count, number of copies) and submit it to the print shops around your town for price estimates. Ask to see samples of their work and, likewise, show them a copy of some other magazine that uses a format similar to what you're striving for. Don't expect printers to always be understanding; often, the most creative these guys get is printing the local high school play program and they might object to nudity or graphic violence in your illustrations. Be imaginative when considering how to print your publication; it's your biggest expense and if you can cut corners anywhere, do it. Does Uncle Charlie have a typesetting system? Will your brother-in-law's company let you use the photocopier? Are you willing to assemble and bind the copies yourself, or with some friends? Money saved is money spent on the next issue, and once you get a taste for publishing, you may find it hard to quit.

Postage: You'll grow to hate this word, just like "dentist" or "tax return." When your magazine is ready, take a sample to the post office and compare book rate, third class, and first class charges. If your mailing list is large enough, investigate bulk rate. If you're involved with any non-profit organization such as a f/sf fan club, see if you can use their bulk permit.

Paying Your Contributors: Some pay in cash, {A cent, '/2 cent, or a big one cent per word for fiction, a buck or two for poems and artwork, plus

copies of the issue in which the work appears. Some pay strictly in copies. Nobody will get rich selling you stories at five bucks a pop, but it's a matter of honor; token payments mean a lot to some contributors.

Getting It Out There: This is the hard part: selling. You'll do most of your trade through the mails. Circulate flyers in all your correspondence. Offer to trade ads with other small magazines of similar interest. Lots of small magazines have review columns-make use of these. Take out display ads in larger publications as your wallet permits. Whenever you see a similar magazine offered by a catalog dealer, send a copy of yours and see if they're interesting in selling it as well. Go to your local bookstores and ask them to carry your magazine. Distribute flyers at fantasy, horror, and science fiction conventions and make contacts with the huckster room dealers. Do anything and everything; you'll need to, because it's a jungle out there.

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[1] "Margie" (Benny Davis, Con Conrad, J. Russell Robinson) Copyright 1920 Mills Music, Inc. (renewed 1948 by Mills Music, Inc. and Fred Fisher Music Co., Inc.)